SULLIVAN'S COMIC OPERAS

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SULLIVAN'S COMIC OPERAS

A CRITICAL APPRECIATION

BY

THOMAS F. DUNHILL

LONDON

EDWARD ARNOLD & CO.

1928

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PREFATORY NOTE

By the kind permission of Mr. Herbert Sullivan, Messrs. Chappell & Co., Ltd. Messrs. Metzler & Co. Ltd., and Messrs. Boosey & Co. Ltd., I have been enabled to illustrate this book with numerous extracts from Sir Arthur Sullivan's operas, in music type. I am deeply sensible of the value of the privilege thus accorded, for without such quotations many of the detailed criticisms and appreciations contained in the text would have been unintelligible.

In my endeavours to vindicate Sullivan from the severe condemnation which has been passed upon so much of his work I have found it necessary to deal vigorously, and even harshly, with the utterances of some of my personal friends.

I hope they will forgive me.

In the case of Dr. Ernest Walker, I may perhaps be allowed, in justification, to quote a sentence from his own book, *A History of Music in England* :

"In his official capacity, no critic of literature or art or anything else recognizes the existence of such a thing as personal friendship, past or present; criticism on any other terms is merely a roundabout name for dishonesty."

1 7 6 1 2

I hope that this incontrovertible view may be shared by Mr. Rutland Boughton and others, with whom, in defence of Sullivan, I have not hesitated to cross swords.

THOMAS F. DUNHILL.

GUILDFORD,
1928.

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ARTHUR SEYMOUR SULLIVAN

Son of Thomas Sullivan, a native of County Cork, Ireland, who was Bandmaster at The Royal Military College, Sandhurst, and afterwards at Kneller Hall.

Born Lambeth, London, May 13, 1842.

Became chorister at the Chapel Royal, April, 1854.

Elected first Mendelssohn Scholar, 1856.

Entered Royal Academy of Music, London, 1857; studied under Goss and Sterndale Bennett.

Entered Conservatorium, Leipzig, 1858; studied under Plaidy, Hauptmann, Richter, Julius Rietz and Moscheles.

Returned to London, 1861.

First important work, the music to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, performed Crystal Palace, April 5, 1862.

Early Successes: Cantata *Kenilworth*, Birmingham Festival, 1864; *Symphony in E*, Crystal Palace, March 1866; Overture *In Memoriam*, Norwich Festival, 1866; *Concerto* for violoncello and orchestra, played by Piatti, Crystal Palace, November 1866; Oratorio *The Prodigal Son*, Worcester Festival, 1869; *Overtura di Ballo*, Birmingham Festival, 1870; Oratorio *The Light of the World*, Birmingham Festival, 1873.

Succeeded Costa as Conductor of the Leeds Festival, 1880, an appointment held till 1898. The sacred cantatas *The Martyr of Antioch* (1880) and *The Golden Legend* (1886) were produced at Leeds.

Principal of The National Training School for Music, South Kensington (afterwards merged into The Royal College of Music) from 1876 to 1881.

Received Honorary Degrees of Doctor of Music from Cambridge 1876, Oxford 1879.

Knighted by Queen Victoria, 1883.

Died in London, November 22, 1900, and was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral on November 27.

SULLIVAN'S COMIC OPERAS

CHAPTER I

MAINLY IN DEFENCE

It should not be necessary to defend a writer who is so firmly established in popular esteem that his best works are more widely known and more keenly appreciated over a quarter of a century after his death than they were at any period during his lifetime.

But no critical appreciation of Sullivan can be attempted to-day which does not, from the first, adopt a defensive attitude, for his music has suffered in an extraordinary degree from the vigorous attacks which have been made upon it in professional circles. These attacks have succeeded in surrounding the composer with a kind of barricade of prejudice which must be swept away before justice can be done to his genius.

If Sullivan's detractors had been people of little account in the musical world their judgments might have been ignored. But this, unfortunately, is not the case. In many instances they were significant contemporary musicians who, perhaps rightly, considered their own aims more lofty than his. And so, fully convinced that

Sullivan ought never to have had the success which he achieved, they have been at great pains to explain to the public how accidental, how undeserved, how thoroughly discreditable to the musical taste of this country, that success was.

This is a serious matter which must be seriously met, for, unless the false impression of Sullivan's position which these critics have created is corrected, historians of future generations will be confronted with a problem of great difficulty in determining the importance of this composer's place in English music. It is now obvious to any outsider that the contemporary estimate of the most advanced musicians was utterly wrong-headed, for Sullivan's comic operas survive and enjoy abundant life to-day, whereas very few other British musical works of the same period represent more than mere names to any but elderly devotees with long memories. Nevertheless there are many students of music whose opinions are formed by what they read rather than by what they hear, and it is therefore of high importance that a more just sense of perspective should be established.

Contemporary disparagement of Sullivan generally adopted one or other of two definite attitudes. He was either regarded as a negligible writer of music which, whether earnest or gay, appealed only to the ears of the uncultured and indiscriminate, or as a man of genius who might have done great things had he taken his art more seriously, and not frittered away his talents, for gain, upon ephemeral rubbish which could not possibly

survive. Those who embraced the latter view were ever ready and eager to say even more than they meant whenever Sullivan turned his thoughts towards solemn things. The rejoicings in this camp when *The Golden Legend* was first performed at the Leeds Festival in 1886 (the year following the production of *The Mikado*) knew no bounds. Sullivan was greeted by his brother professionals as a lost sheep returned to the fold! Even Stanford, who was seldom enthusiastic in his estimate of his contemporary, rushed into print with the most generous praises,[1] but was at the same time careful to point the moral.

"It would be scarcely too much to prophesy," he says, "that a place, not only amongst the permanent successes of our generation, but even in the shelves of the classics, is ready for this masterly composition of the English school."

Then follows a description of the 'scenario' of the cantata, after which Stanford prefaces his detailed comments upon the music with some preliminary moralizing. If the years intervening since the production of the *Tempest* music in 1862 and the Cantata of *Kenilworth* at the Birmingham Festival of 1864

"had been obliterated from the composer's musical life the musical world would have welcomed the *Golden Legend* as a natural sequel and a genuine artistic advance upon his two admirable early works. But it is possible to go a considerable step farther, and to acknowledge it a work fully worthy of his maturity. The case is undoubtedly a peculiar one. After winning his spurs with ease by the production of these two cantatas,

[1] Stanford's article, which appeared in one of the leading Reviews, is reprinted in his *Studies and Memories*, Constable & Co., 1908.

Sir Arthur Sullivan turned his attention principally to a class of composition which, if always showing in unmistakable clearness the stamp of the musician's hand, was of a standard of art distinctly below the level of his abilities. . . . Of the reasons which prompted such a decision it is outside the province of the contemporary critic to speak hastily or harshly. The most unbiassed judge would be the Mendelssohn Scholar of 1860 and the composer of *The Golden Legend* of 1886. It would, however, be only natural to expect that, after so many years spent in lighter work, some diminution would be apparent in the power of creating and sustaining a masterpiece of the high standard which the composer had so long left untouched. . . . *The Golden Legend* is produced and raises Sullivan's reputation at a stroke to the point which it might reasonably have been expected to have reached, if the intervening years had been spent upon the most earnest and serious development of the promise of his earlier work. It restores him to his legitimate position as one of the leaders of the English school, and, inasmuch as the genuine success of his last composition will have made a return to less elevated forms of the art a matter of difficulty, if not of impossibility, the musical world may be led to hope for a series of lasting treasures from his genius. . . . The composer of *The Golden Legend* must now give posterity the chance of enjoying the fruits of his genius, and stay his hand from works which, however refined and musicianly, must of their very nature and surroundings be ephemeral, and pass away with the fashion which gave them birth."

The most pointed and picturesque reproof for Sullivan's misdeeds is, however, reserved for the peroration :

"It is natural, nay more, it is right, that in the Paradise of Music, as in other Paradises, there should be more rejoicing over Sullivan's great and legitimate success, than over the works of the ninety and nine just composers who have remained uninfluenced (perhaps because untempted) by considerations of profit and popularity."

Alas, for Stanford's reasoned theories and pious hopes ! Within a year *The Mikado* was provided with a successor in *Ruddigore*. The tempter had triumphed once more.

The repentant sinner—who had redeemed his good name at Leeds with a work which was destined, after a short life, to be buried in oblivion in company with most of the other big-scale choral works of the mid-Victorian age—had created another masterpiece of that 'ephemeral' calibre which was to delight generations of music-lovers yet unborn!

It is proverbially easy to be wise after the event, and Stanford was only one of many serious musicians whose visionary propensities were seriously at fault in this matter.

Even so it is odd that no important critic of the period seemed shrewd enough to guess that Sullivan would ultimately take his place as a great composer in a limited sphere, that his comic operas would survive, and, in course of time, be recognized as the vehicles by which his highest qualities were fully revealed. When he died the public mourned, for he had served them well, but the writer of the obituary notice in *The Times* thought fit to allude to the regrettable circumstance that a man who might have achieved greatness should "set himself to rival Offenbach and Lecocq, instead of competing on a level of high seriousness with such musicians as Sir Hubert Parry and Professor Stanford."

It is possible, however, to deal more temperately with this attitude than with the contemptuous animosity of those who, through sheer prejudice, must vent their spleen upon what they are incapable of enjoying. Let us examine, in some detail, the kind of thing which

masquerades as critical judgment upon Sullivan's work in Dr. Ernest Walker's *History of Music in England*. Dr. Walker is a well-known Oxford musician whose erudition and ability cannot be called in question, and who speaks, as it were, from a seat of authority. The book is an important one. It covers a wide field and is full of valuable information. It was originally published in 1907, and has been revised and reprinted with modifications and additions in 1924. Not a single alteration has been made in the passages dealing with Sullivan, showing that the author (who declares, in a new preface, that his views remain unchanged) is entirely unrepentant. The fact that the works he endeavoured to slay with contempt in 1907 were still very much alive evidently did not cause him the smallest uneasiness as to the validity of his original judgments.

With Dr. Walker's initial statements on the subject there can be no quarrel. "Sullivan," he says, "was beyond all question the most widely popular English composer of the nineteenth century." "The comic operas written to the libretti of W. S. Gilbert made his reputation and form indeed his chief title to fame." So far so good. But he goes on to speak of "the comparative failure, though the music shows no difference in quality, of the operas subsequently written for other librettists." In his association with Gilbert "it is nearly always the librettist who is the inspiring talent. . . ." "We laugh whole-heartedly at the words and are grateful that the music does not hinder our enjoyment." The

words "can be read by themselves," but the music, he contends, "as regards ninety-nine pages out of a hundred, is not self-subsisting."

So strong is Dr. Walker's dislike of Sullivan's music that he cannot even recognize Gilbert's share in the success of the operas without belittling his collaborator. To most of us the circumstance that words and music approach a kind of indivisible unity would, in an opera, be accounted a special merit. The fact that very little of Sullivan's operatic music, apart from that written to Gilbert's text, occupies a place of importance in English music is significant, but it is easy to draw a false conclusion from this, as we see Dr. Walker has done. The permanence of operas always depends largely upon the subjects and qualities of the libretti. We find that Weber, as a dramatic composer, lives chiefly by *Der Freischütz*, and that *Euryanthe*, which contains far finer music, has failed to hold the stage, and is, except for its overture, quite unknown even to musicians. What is never performed is seldom studied, and an opera which drops out of the repertory is lost to the world in any form. To argue that Sullivan was an inconsiderable composer because most of the works which he wrote with other librettists are dead is entirely fallacious reasoning, especially as it is not true that the music of his later operas "shows no difference in quality." To speak of Gilbert as the "inspiring talent" and to deny to Sullivan any greater achievement than that of failing to "hinder our enjoyment" is to make strange use of

the word "inspiring." One may reasonably ask what has become of the operas which Gilbert wrote with other composers. Why is it that *Princess Toto*, *Fallen Fairies*, *The Mountebanks* and *His Excellency* are dead—far deader than any of the operas which Sullivan wrote in conjunction with other authors, although, in the case of the last two especially, they contain some of Gilbert's most brilliant work?

In order to drive his point home, however, Dr. Walker hazards the opinion that in the Sullivan operas "the overtures are mere emptiness unless we know beforehand to what words the tunes will afterwards be fitted." This is an unjust, and indeed a ridiculous criticism, which anyone who has heard *Iolanthe* or *The Yeomen of the Guard* will be able to refute by a very slight effort of memory. To Dr. Walker, however, Sullivan's operatic music is "mere froth" which "only very rarely leaves a bad taste behind"; its artistic merits are "in the main of a somewhat negative order." How far the writer speaks from actual knowledge of the works thus airily dismissed we may perhaps gauge from the fact that the only comic opera mentioned at all is *The Mikado*, and that merely to allude to the famous 'Madrigal' as something which "in its trifling way is the work of a genuine and delicate-handed artist."

Is it credible that a book purporting to be a history of music in England (let us remember) should not even mention such world-famous works as *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *Iolanthe*, *Ruddigore* or *The Gondoliers*? If nothing could

convince Dr. Walker that Sullivan had any "steadiness of artistic purpose" he might have surmised that "a genuine and delicate-handed artist" in the course of a long career devoted principally to operatic composition would have achieved something worthy of praise in addition to this one little vocal quartet.

So much for the estimate of Sullivan as a writer of light opera: "for his positive qualities," he adds, "we have to look elsewhere." When Dr. Walker looks elsewhere, however, we shall find it is merely to pass from damning with faint praise to damning with brickbats. Setting aside a grudging tribute to the composer's "admirably clear and economically effective orchestration" and the "dexterous smooth workmanship" of a "handful" of early efforts, we find work after work pulverized for what is called "abysmally cheap sentimentality," "vulgarity" or "dullness"—and sometimes "both at once." The bulk of *The Golden Legend* is "hardly ever worse than dull drawing-room music": it is, "as a whole, a melancholy production." *Ivanhoe* is a "purely elementary work all through"; an opera "the deadly dullness" of which "passes belief." In short, whether in serious mood or gay, not a shred of hope is left for the composer, more of whose music survives in active life to-day than that of any English musician up to the advent of Elgar. There is not a word of acknowledgment of his extraordinary gift of fitting the apt unforgettable musical equivalent to the verbal phrase, not a word of his rhythmic variety, his crisp precision, his tenderness, his piquant

humour—the hundred and one human qualities which make Sullivan's art so lovable.

Instead of any attempt to give the composer credit for what he did well, a tremendous effort is made to catalogue in detail almost everything he did less than well. The only quotation in music-type to illustrate his style is the most unfortunate melody from his most unfortunate orchestral work—not, of course, quoted with approval, but with exaggerated disgust. How is one to tolerate such methods in patience?

We do not base our estimate of Beethoven upon the *Battle of Vittoria*, the *Choral Fantasia* or the weaker solo-songs; of Schubert upon his clumsiest and most ill-constructed piano pieces; of Mendelssohn upon *Hear my Prayer* or the most sentimental and superficial of his effusions which have already died a natural death; of Wagner upon *Rienzi* or his pianoforte sonata. To judge Sullivan by his failures, by his obvious pot-boiling drawing-room songs, by his defunct oratorios (which conformed to the fashions of the time) to the exclusion of his most characteristic works, as Dr. Walker has done, is to commit what is perhaps the most offensive crime of the critic, to pronounce sentence of death without listening to any evidence which is in favour of the accused.

The whole estimate of Sullivan by this 'historian' is so cruelly crooked, unfair and truculent that one can hardly believe that a cultured man could have dared to put his signature to it. It seems almost incredible that anyone who can appreciate so fully the merits of, let us

say, Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien* or the Dogberry scenes from *Much Ado about Nothing* can withhold acknowledgment from far more palpable manifestations of genius, such as the ghost song in *Ruddigore* or the Peers' chorus from *Iolanthe*. But so it is. There appears to be a definite type of middle-aged musician who sets out at any cost to render himself impervious to the appeal of Sullivan, just as there is a type of young musician who thinks it a sign of great enlightenment to deny greatness to Beethoven—for the sake of being in the intellectual fashion.

If we are to acquit Sullivan of the charges which, here and elsewhere, are so glibly brought against him, we must seek to view his life-work in its proper perspective. It is well to remember that his career was at its height during that active period when certain of his English contemporaries were endeavouring, with set purpose, to achieve distinction in more classic forms. There is no doubt that they were fighting a splendid battle, challenging the giants of continental music on their own ground, and claiming the right of British composers to take their place upon the highway of serious art which they had trodden in the distant past. Apart from the great things these men accomplished, so to speak, in their own right, they certainly paved the way for the recognition of such writers as Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst and Ireland.

Sullivan took no part in this ardent revival. His direct musical influence upon his contemporaries and

successors was not great. He went his own way, conscious, no doubt, that it was in his own limited field that he could serve his art most satisfactorily. It was only on rare occasions that he sought to compete with his serious contemporaries. Nobody could possibly compete with him. He remained the idol of a large and faithful public who knew little and cared less for the strenuous efforts which were being made by others to establish a school of modern musical thought in this country.

From this circumstance a certain amount of bitterness was bound to be engendered. Our serious composers of the later nineteenth century complained, loudly and constantly, that they were characterized as 'academic' composers. They complained with some justice, it is true. Their leading spokesman, Mr. J. A. Fuller-Maitland, put the case for their defence in a memorable phrase when he defined 'academic' as "an epithet applied to those who understand their work by those who do not." But at the same time it may be pointed out that their superior attitude towards Sullivan was one of the reasons why such a label was attached to these musicians. A little more broad-mindedness on their part would have done much to ease the situation. The present writer, having been associated throughout the whole of his musical life with serious musicians of this type (having indeed been dubbed 'academic' himself on occasion), does not believe that their disparagement of Sullivan was due to jealousy in the very least, but rather to a complete ignorance that musical genius could exist

in any other type of artist than their own. They ignored Sullivan as unworthy. They did not grudge him the success he won or dislike him personally, but they were completely unable to see that his music had any qualities of permanence in it at all, or that he was anything more than a man of limited talent who had taken the wrong turning. There were, strange to say, very few exceptions to this. A student at the Royal College of Music in the 'nineties,' for instance, hardly dared to express an admiration for Sullivan either to his professor or his fellow-students. It is true that Sir George Grove was ever loyal to the old friend who had shared with him in the wonderful Schubert discoveries,[1] but after the retirement of Grove in 1894 it was considered scarcely decent to mention Sullivan's name with approval in the building. It is hardly necessary to add that the R.C.M. in those days was the Mecca of conscious British musical culture. It has, perhaps fortunately, lost that exclusive reputation to-day, with the influx of the younger University set and other new blood, and it is unlikely that the continued success of Sullivan's operas is considered a disturbing element in education. Indeed there are many professors there, as well as students, who will be ready to confess, without a blush, to the genuine pleasure they have received in witnessing a performance of *The Mikado* or *The Gondoliers* conducted by one of their most distin-

[1] It was in 1867 that Grove and Sullivan journeyed together to Vienna to search for lost manuscripts of Schubert, a search which resulted in the thrilling rescue of the whole of the music to *Rosamunde*.

guished colleagues on the staff, Dr. Malcolm Sargent. *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis.*

Meanwhile, in certain other corners, there still linger echoes of the ancient prejudices. The queer genus Sullivan-hater is not yet extinct. He springs up now and again in unexpected places. Even in 1927, when the operas are still drawing crowded houses after nearly fifty years of continuous success all over the world, we find so prominent a musician as Mr. Rutland Boughton (himself a successful writer of a popular opera) returning with zest to the old attack. This time it is not so much to belittle Sullivan's skill as a composer as to censure his influence upon the course of true opera, which never did run smooth. Mr. Boughton's enthusiasm for his ideal of serious opera (where, he says, the practical art of the drama should be associated with the spiritual art of music) has caused him to deplore the success of a series of light operas which do not in any sense compete with the kind of works he is desirous of fostering. Sullivan, however, is his bogey. "I believe the operas have done more to harm the cause of English opera than those of any other composer," is Mr. Boughton's reported declaration; "what they do is to serve as a very pleasant entertainment when people have had a little more dinner than is good for them." At the same time he has ventured to characterize them as "dull works," which seems a little inconsistent on the face of it, but consistency is never the strong point of an opponent of Sullivan's art. Apart from a mild expression of surprise that dullness

should be thought the best antidote for indigestion, we need not greatly concern ourselves with this recent onslaught. Mr. Boughton looks hopefully to amateurs for the development of his own most admirable schemes, and he finds them nearly all busily occupied with the operas which, in his view, are obstructing the path of progress. He forgets that these amateurs are staunch upholders of traditions of which they are genuinely proud, and that these operas, by infallibly attracting large audiences, are supplying them with funds wherewith to continue their activities. If amateurs were not playing Gilbert and Sullivan it is certain that they would be playing something infinitely less good and infinitely harder to supplant. The fact that they have developed their taste through the study of the best light operas of our time should surely encourage Mr. Boughton in his ambitious plans for the expansion of British operatic enterprise, which enterprise, one may heartily agree, certainly needs expansion. It is, indeed, improbable that the existing companies for the production of serious English opera in Liverpool and elsewhere (in which Mr. Boughton is so deeply interested) would have sprung into being at all had it not been for the work of fertilization which many continuous years of Sullivan performances by amateurs have brought about.

Enough space has now been given to the defence of Sullivan from the slings and arrows of outrageous critics. There remains a further and perhaps more delicate task —the task of rescuing him from his friends. It would

be unjust, however, not to admit in the first place that there have been some reasoned acknowledgments of his powers by a few unprejudiced writers. We find these, in occasional paragraphs in Cecil Forsyth's *Music and Nationalism*, paragraphs which have to be searched for, since this fine book is primarily a study of English serious opera. We find them in Sir Alexander Mackenzie's admirable lecture on Sullivan delivered at the Royal Institution in May 1901. A. H. Godwin's capital book *Gilbert and Sullivan* also deals sanely and sympathetically with the composer's work,[1] though it goes astray in technical matters now and again, and does not profess to view the operas from the purely musical standpoint. A whole-hearted appreciation of Sullivan is that of Charles Willeby in his *Masters of English Music*. The long essay on the composer in this book contains much that is both sympathetic and charmingly expressed, but it is a little disturbing to a musician by reason of its amateurishness of utterance. Directly a technical point comes up for discussion we find allusions to his great skill in writing for "brass and wood bands," his habit of "plunging headlong into a whirlwind of string and wood," and so forth. These are difficult to tolerate. Nor can we quite fathom the author's paradox that "it is frequently when under the spell of another that he is most himself. For whoever that other may be—be he Schubert or

[1] The singularly penetrating Introduction to this book by G. K. Chesterton is especially noteworthy as a concise study of the famous partnership.

Mendelssohn, Gounod or Bizet—it is only in the light of Sullivan that he is visible. And thereby the latter's own individuality is the more prominently thrown up." This seems a roundabout way of confessing that Sullivan was not, at times, a very original composer, which is perfectly true. It would be better to admit this in plain words without seeking to varnish the defect, if defect it be.

Apart from the above exceptions, it must be confessed that almost all the laudatory books on Sullivan are very much alike. They tell the same stories, recount the same incidents and indulge in the same fulsome panegyrics, often in the selfsame words. There is little attempt at reasoned criticism. No student of to-day is likely to be impressed by such a statement as the following:

"Sullivan's style in the main is a modernized form of the English music of the seventeenth century . . . his concerted music has its paternity in the motets and madrigals of such characteristic composers as Byrd, Morley and Gibbons."

This is a quotation from B. W. Findon's popular volume *Sir Arthur Sullivan and his Operas*, and one can only conjecture that the author is more familiar with the names of these illustrious Englishmen than with their works. In Morley alone can any kinship be traced, and that only in a certain vein of careless happiness which was a native quality in Sullivan's output. Another book (partly by the same writer) tells us that the Sullivan operas "are as perfect in their way as the masterpieces of Beethoven and Bach," and, in addition, contains sundry

dissertations upon the "blissful melody," the "gush of harmonious sound" and "the rapturous notes that have been borne on the bosom of enchanted winds to the distant shores of the wide-extended Universe."

We begin to wonder at last if it is not better to suffer the contempt of the learned and the scorn of the indifferent than to be at the mercy of such indiscriminate and efflorescent admirers!

A large shelf could be furnished with books of this kind, together with those which deal chattily with the stage productions and the numerous revivals (with every cast tabulated and compared with the one before), the foibles of Gilbert, the personalities of the Savoyards (a kind of generic name for the actors and singers who have taken part in the performances, whether at the Savoy Theatre or elsewhere)—for all of which there would appear to be an insatiable public demand. We may read therein many entertaining accounts of what Gilbert said to Grossmith, or what Sullivan said to Barrington (and what *they* said in reply), or how D'Oyly Carte drove a favourable bargain over a feast of oysters, or lost a fortune over *Ivanhoe*: we can take our choice of at least half-a-dozen versions of the quarrel about a carpet, which had such unhappy results, and sympathize, if we are so inclined, with the supposed sufferings of the Royal Family over some perfectly harmless fun in *Utopia, Limited*.

But if we were to devour the whole contents of this very considerable library we should still have learnt but

little of the real factors which have made Gilbert and Sullivan so intimately known to the English-speaking races all over the world. It is surely time that something more than this pleasant chit-chat should be available for those who are interested in what are, in point of fact, the only operas which the Englishman can point to as a National popular asset, in the same way that Wagner is a National popular asset in Germany—the only operas which have actually survived with us in the sense that their appeal is as strong to the younger generation of to-day as to the older generation who have known them since they were new.

This book is an attempt to estimate the value and musical importance of Sullivan's comic operas. It deals especially with the works for which Gilbert provided the libretti, since it was in these only that the composer's gifts were fully revealed. It is no part of the author's intention to set forth extravagant claims on behalf of a composer whose excellences were modest rather than heroic, who always preferred to please his hearers rather than to dictate to them or rule them. While believing that simple tenderness, frank vivacity and the spirit of youth are attributes of the art of music which frequently call forth too little acknowledgment, the weaknesses which frequently accompany their expression in Sullivan's case are freely admitted.

The English as a nation are said to take their pleasures sadly. As regards operatic entertainments, this is the reverse of the truth. The cheery little operas with

which this book is concerned deal almost entirely with transient matters ; they satirize, with a light touch, the fashions and eccentricities of the times in which they appeared. Like the works of Handel, they "were not dedicated to an unknown posterity, but produced to satisfy the daily needs of their age." [1] And they alone, frivolous though they be, have survived to mirror the period for succeeding generations. This fact by itself is almost sufficient to justify the contention that, despite his limitations, Sullivan was the most completely national composer that England has produced since Henry Purcell. Like all men of genius, he possessed the faculty of saying the memorable thing unconsciously and without apparent effort. He had no fear of the obvious. He did not need to wrap his ideas in obscurity, for they always stood the true test of music—they sounded well. So much of the mid- and late-Victorian music, both serious and light, was practically still-born. It had no chance to thrive : the most vivacious and vigorous of performances could not galvanize it into life. Sullivan's music, even when it was most trivial, was never without the pulsation of living rhythm which is so difficult to describe yet so easy to feel. For this reason it is a troublesome matter to treat his work critically or analytically in a convincing way.

It is commonly believed that the lesser men of an age achieve popularity whilst the greater are comparatively unrecognized by the crowd. This belief has unquestion-

[1] See Lord Balfour's Essay on Handel.

ably had something to do with the tardy recognition of Sullivan by cultured musicians. He was so successful with the crowd that many earnest people jumped to the conclusion that his work could have no lasting qualities. In England some of our finest serious musicians have been positively afraid of being appreciated. It is recorded that Hubert Parry re-wrote the whole of a movement of one of his symphonies because, as he said, "people liked it so much that I thought there must be something wrong with it." The theory that culture is always right and the populace always wrong is one which the cultured have always keenly tried to bolster up. But unfortunately posterity does not always abide by comforting regulations of this kind. It has a way of playing tricks with our most piously inspired prophecies. The winnowing processes of time sometimes grant no special respect to those who take themselves over-seriously. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that mediocre and meretricious art is often successful with the multitude beyond its deserts for a time, yet it also frequently happens that work which is simple and easily understood has more permanent value than that which requires sustained effort for its appreciation. In music, especially, sheer spontaneity quite commonly outlives the conscious cleverness of profound thinkers.

Many a real genius, too, is content to take things as he finds them, and to trouble little about the exploration of unknown paths. Sullivan was such a genius. He used no harmonies that composers before him had not

used over and over again. His melodies were perfectly proportioned in an orthodox way, and he seldom attempted to arrest our attention by oddities of shape or rhythm. His orchestration, skilful and apt as it invariably was, was never in the least degree experimental. And yet, within such circumscribed limits, his art is always recognizable for its personal quality. The Sullivan touch is unmistakable and can be felt instantly. This is where he was so immeasurably above his contemporaries, above those who could boast superior mental equipment, higher craftsmanship and more sustained ideals. He was a natural singer as Purcell was, as Mozart was, as Schubert was, and what he did by the light of nature has outlived what many others did deliberately for the enrichment of art.

Unless we adopt the view that music is the exclusive property of a privileged intellectual set, and that Sullivan's work must be regarded as negligible because it appeals to millions of people who care little for serious art, we must be prepared to admit as much as this. A great composer, in the sense that we apply the word great to Purcell, Mozart or Schubert, he certainly was not. But he was of the goodly company of those who wrought better than they knew, who wielded the strange power of stilling our critical faculty, and filled our memories with melodies that we are unable to forget. As such he deserves a belated tribute from his own profession, a tribute which has been persistently withheld and is long overdue.

relied for their success chiefly upon the number of simple songs (mainly in an artificially elegant or sentimental vein) which were introduced. These, since they had only the slightest dramatic significance, could readily be transplanted into the Victorian drawing-room, and it was purely their domestic fame which kept the works which contained them from disappearing out of the repertory.

When Sullivan's operas appeared they swept away the undergrowth of time-worn British conventions, and opened up a new vista. They were definitely humorous and satirical, and being devised as topical skits they abounded in anachronisms, but they possessed a unity and consistency which had been practically unknown on the English operatic stage for nearly two hundred years. The operas of Sullivan owe little or nothing to their artless English predecessors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. They are far more nearly allied to the true comic operas of France. Indeed they are almost the only English works which can be compared with the best French type of comic opera, of which the charming works of Delibes and the more recent examples of Andrê Messager (such as *La Basoche* and *The Little Michus*) are characteristic specimens.

Those who have wished to under-rate Sullivan's stage works have sometimes declared that they belong to the genus 'Opéra Bouffe,' but this is surely not the case. The French Opéra Bouffe (which must not be confused with the Italian Opera Buffa, of which Rossini's

Il Barbiere is a classic instance) is always of an entirely trivial character, provided with music of the '*café chantant*' order.

Even the lightest of Sullivan's works has a dignity to which no Opéra Bouffe has ever been known to aspire. The comparison would be unimportant were it not that an injustice was done to Sullivan by no less a personage than Sir George Macfarren, sometime Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, who, apparently in ill-natured pique, dubbed his colleague 'The English Offenbach'—Offenbach being the most successful writer of Opéra Bouffe of his day. Unfortunately the remark was given permanence by its inclusion in Macfarren's article on Music in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It was never intended as a compliment, nor was it taken as such. Indeed we know that Sullivan smarted under what he considered an unjust taunt. It happens that Offenbach is known to us in these days by his delightful *Tales of Hoffmann*, and it may seem a strange thing that offence should have been caused by the comparison. But at the time the words were used Offenbach's one genuinely artistic achievement was unknown here, and he was appealing only to the lowest order of intelligence with his flippant, superficial and vulgar extravaganzas. If we must institute any comparison between the art of Sullivan and the effusions of such a 'glittering trifler' as Offenbach, we should adopt the clever simile offered by Cecil Forsyth, who, in his *Music and Nationalism*, has said that in their way "Sullivan and Offenbach were

both diamonds," but that "the latter was of the kind known in Regent Street as a 'Parisian diamond'."

We shall certainly be doing fuller justice to Sullivan, then, if we place his work upon a similar plane to the Opéra-Comique of France. His operas did not always attain such a degree of artistic finish as those of the best French masters of light music, it is true, and some have preferred to speak of them as operettas rather than comic operas. There is no cause for quarrelsome dissensions on this score. But an operetta abroad is practically always in one act, and an opera in three or more. Gilbert and Sullivan, beginning with *The Sorcerer* and ending with *The Grand Duke*, planned all of theirs (with but one exception) in two acts. This feature, which was a novelty at the time, is the main point, perhaps, which distinguishes their construction from that of the popular musical pieces of France, Italy and Germany. In every other respect they are entitled to whatever historical dignity the name comic opera confers upon them.

In dealing with the initial factors which led to the institution of our own English species of comic opera for which Sullivan (with the aid of Gilbert) was solely responsible, it has seemed necessary to trace a certain kinship with foreign operatic models, but the point must not be stressed unduly. Despite the undeniably strong impress of French and Italian methods upon the composer's stage work, its actual origin, the germ of its growth, was both native and humble. It will be necessary, before proceeding further, to cast a backward glance

on a musical organization known as "Mr. and Mrs. German Reed's Entertainment," which enjoyed extraordinary repute amongst the more innocent members of London and suburban society from somewhere about 1856 up till 1895, when the emancipation of its audiences and the sudden death of its two most prominent performers brought it to an abrupt end. The entertainment which the German Reeds and their successors provided could only have found favour in England ; it was a harmless, pleasant and typically mid-Victorian institution. It appealed especially to clergymen, Nonconformist ministers, and that large class of eminently respectable persons (now non-existent) who regarded the door of a theatre as the entrance to Hell. Therefore the entertainment was presented in buildings which were, to all intents and purposes theatres, but were called, successively, St. Martin's Hall, The Gallery of Illustration and, finally, St. George's Hall. The actors were not, if one remembers aright, called actors, for the word had unholy associations, and the plays they performed were not called plays. They dealt mainly with the homeliest sentiments, and were well acted—or rather 'illustrated,' which was (if memory serves) the approved substitution for that wicked word. They were entirely of the type to which mothers of the period could safely take their daughters, or the youthful of later times could have taken their grandmothers. The music was often pretty enough, sometimes it was very pretty indeed. It was sung, however, to the somewhat lugubrious accompani-

ment of piano and harmonium. The latter instrument was chosen, doubtless, as being, from its semi-sacred associations, in keeping with the religious convictions of the audience.

Considering all these hampering conditions, the entertainment contrived to be remarkably joyous and expressive, for playwrights and composers of considerable talent were requisitioned to provide the bill-of-fare, and they succeeded marvellously in exercising their skill within the stringent limitations which the promoters enforced. At all events from this innocuous beginning great things sprang.

It seems strange that there should be any connection between such decorous displays as are here described and the far more elaborate merriment of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. But Mr. and Mrs. German Reed were virtually the proprietors of a *crèche* in which each of these future masters played and prattled and learnt to walk, artistically speaking, before he grew up. The 'high moral tone' of the institution evidently left its impress upon them both, for when in after years they came together to discuss their plans of action they resolved that nothing so vulgar as the appearance of a woman in man's clothes (or vice versa) should be allowed to disfigure their productions, and that no jest that could bring a blush to the cheek of innocence should ever find admission. On the whole they kept their resolution very well.

Sullivan's first essay in operetta form, however, saw

the light prior to his meeting with Gilbert. It was, we are told, the outcome of a desire to write something in English in the style of a little musical farce by Offenbach, called *Les Deux Aveugles*, which he had seen privately performed at a friend's house. A conversation with F. C. Burnand led to that humorist preparing a libretto based upon an extremely popular farce by Maddison Morton, *Box and Cox*, which Sullivan promptly set to music. *Cox and Box*, as it was now designated, was first publicly heard at a Benefit Performance at the Adelphi Theatre, organized by the staff of *Punch* in 1867. George du Maurier, the artist, appeared as Box, and Arthur Cecil as Bouncer. Two years later it found its way into the programme of Mr. and Mrs. German Reed's entertainment, for which it was quite sufficiently well suited.

Cox and Box, originally described as a Triumviretta (whatever that may mean) contains some very jolly music, and even a few things which are, in their way, little treasures—such as the Lullaby ("Hush-a-bye bacon") set to such ridiculous words that one is inclined to overlook its very real beauty. Here, and in the cheery "Rataplan" ensemble, are actual glimpses of the Sullivan that was to be. Still better, perhaps, is the excellent burlesque description by Box of his suicide-of-convenience, which is extraordinarily well done by the composer. This is almost good enough for serious opera, so skilfully is it worked up. It is a foretaste of the mature art that years later gave us

the imaginative song "When the night wind howls" in *Ruddigore*.

Sullivan's next operatic essay was more ambitious. The libretto was again provided by Burnand. *The Contrabandista*, as the piece was called, had a short spell of life under the auspices of German Reed. This popular manager, while still controlling the entertainment which bore his name at the Gallery of Illustration, launched out upon a supplementary venture at a building in Langham Place which was called the St. George's Opera House. There, on quite an imposing scale, with an excellent company of principals, a large chorus and an orchestra of forty players, he purposed establishing a permanent home of high-class light opera. The programmes were to be varied and to consist of English works together with translated versions of French operettas.

It was under these auspices that *The Contrabandista* saw the light on December 18, 1867. It was a half-programme piece in two short acts, and was played in conjunction with Offenbach's *Ching Chow Hi!* at first, and afterwards with Auber's *Ambassadress*. Sullivan's opera actually made a great hit and was always much enjoyed by the audience. It held the stage for three months.[1] German Reed, however, was not satisfied with

[1] For this information the author is indebted to Mr. A. W. Ganz, whose father, the late Wilhelm Ganz, was one of the conductors at the St. George's Opera House. In the recent *Life of Sullivan* by Herbert Sullivan and Newman Flower (published since this book was written) it is stated that *The Contrabandista* "failed even to get applause and was withdrawn immediately." The facts, however, are as detailed above.

the support accorded to his new scheme, and the house was closed at the end of March 1868. The original entertainment with which his name had been so long associated was transferred to this building in 1874, but the Opera House was wisely re-christened St. George's Hall, under which name it still flourishes as the abode of *Maskelyne's Mysteries*.

The Contrabandista, we are told, was written, composed and produced in the remarkably short space of sixteen days. The vocal score was published at the time, but it is long since out of print and difficult to obtain. A perusal of this pianoforte version (adapted by Sullivan himself from the full score) has been an occupation of great interest to the present writer. The little work consists of fourteen numbers, several of which give remarkable indications of what was to come in after years. The opening duet and chorus contain some delightful phrases of an almost Mozartian elegance in the accompaniment, and though the choral writing is extremely simple in texture it is in every sense effective. There is also a tender little song "Only the night wind sighs alone," in which some pretty verses, reminiscent of Gray's Elegy, are associated with a charmingly vocal melody. This would be worth rescuing from its context, for it could quite well stand alone. An energetic dance in the style of a Bolero is another number which might equally well bear revival.

That the little opera contained matter considered worth preserving can be gathered from the fact that the

author and composer, nearly twenty-seven years afterwards, thought well enough of it to prepare a revised version for performance at the Savoy Theatre. But this version, re-named *The Chieftain*, did not, unfortunately, serve to restore the failing fortunes of the management. It will be dealt with, briefly, later on.

Sullivan, it should be remembered, was busily engaged during these early years in the making of serious music, and light opera was only an unimportant side-issue of his work. His Violoncello Concerto, his oratorio *The Prodigal Son*, his *Marmion* overture, all belong to the period of *The Contrabandista*, and show the main trend of his thoughts.

He first met with Gilbert in 1869 at a rehearsal at the German Reeds. The two men formed a friendship at once, and it was not long before a collaboration was decided upon. The first fruit of this decision, *Thespis, or The Gods Grown Old*, produced at the Gaiety Theatre in December 1871, was never published and is completely forgotten, for it only lived for a month. It is generally supposed, however, that Sullivan utilized the bulk of the music it contained in his future operas. Like other rapid workers, he showed remarkable skill in practising little economies of this kind when emergency tempted.

The first work in which the joint talents of Gilbert and Sullivan were exercised with a vigour and eminence which are sufficient to call for detailed critical observation was *Trial by Jury*. This remains a miniature

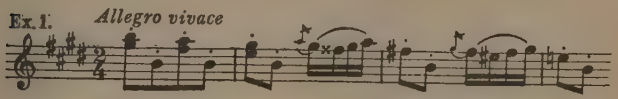
masterpiece of comic delineation which is sure of a popular reception whenever it is adequately performed. Originally described as a Dramatic Cantata (not a very apt title) it was produced at the Royalty Theatre on March 23, 1875. It won such instantaneous success that, although it was only intended to fill up the evening (since Offenbach's *La Perichole*, which was the chief piece, was too short to furnish an entire programme) it became the real attraction of the show. The public flocked to see *Trial by Jury*; Offenbach, for once, occupied a secondary position, and the recognition of Sullivan as a writer of light music of the first order was immediate.

The new entertainment was, in reality, an operatic extravaganza—as operatic as it was extravagant. *Trial by Jury* is in one short act; it is the only Gilbert and Sullivan work in which the music is continuous, and there is no spoken dialogue. In form, therefore, it more nearly resembles the Opera Buffa of Italy than the Opéra-Comique of France, although the manner of much of the music (especially the orchestration and lay-out of the choruses) is typically French.

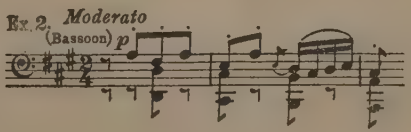
Gilbert's libretto is very familiar, but its main features may perhaps be briefly recounted here. It is a ridiculous travesty of a breach-of-promise case. The author introduces all the ceremonial ritual of an actual 'Court of the Exchequer' but makes violent fun of the dignities of the Judge, Jury, Counsel and Court officials, all of whom are grossly unscrupulous and outrageously impressionable. The climax of the proceed

ings is reached when the learned Judge scatters his books and papers all over the Court, descends from the Bench, and expresses his intention of marrying the fascinating Plaintiff himself. It is from beginning to end sheer caricature, and the nonsense is frequently of a rather blatant character, but it offers plenty of opportunities to a composer capable of dealing lightly with farcical situations and grotesque contrasts. These opportunities were seized upon by Sullivan with evident relish. He softened many of the crudities, and added some touches of subtle humour which were entirely his own.

We can observe the composer's indebtedness to French models immediately the curtain rises. The Jurymen and the interested populace are seen pacing the Court, and heard singing their simple repeated chords while the orchestra is busy with a clever bustling tune which has a decidedly Gallic ring.

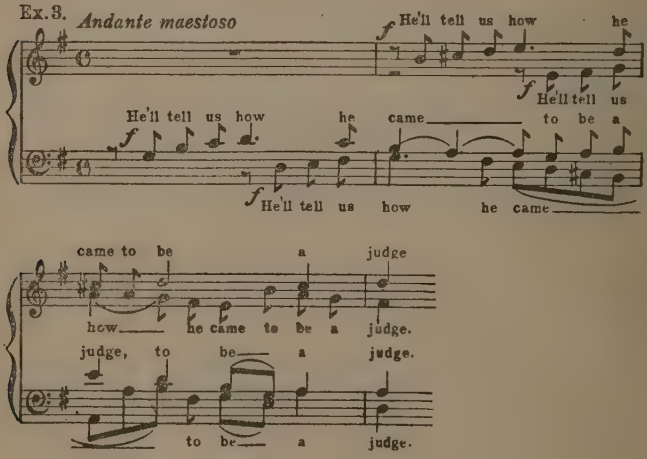


The feeling of impatience is capitally preserved, and when the Usher appears we find that a similar figuration is skilfully employed as a little recurring phrase in his apostrophe, "Now, Jurymen, hear my advice":



This is one of the best songs of the piece, though in performance it is apt to miss its full effect through the gross exaggeration of the comedian. Gilbert's Usher is a figure of fun, but no more a mere clown than is Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*, and Sullivan treats him with pompous seriousness throughout.

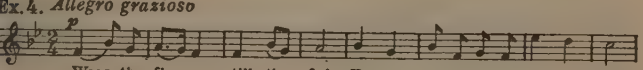
The appearance of the Defendant (amidst the ridiculous satirical comments of the Jurymen) is very deftly dealt with, but when he tunes his guitar and sings his ditty, "I was a love-sick boy," the music unfortunately lapses into an easy commonplace style. The musical interest greatly revives, however, for the entrance of the Learned Judge. This is a splendid piece of mock solemnity, particularly in the contrapuntal choral sections, as the brief extract printed below will testify:

Ex. 3. *Andante maestoso*

He'll tell us how he
He'll tell us
He'll tell us how he came to be a
He'll tell us how he came
came to be a judge
how he came to be a judge.
judge, to be a judge.
to be a judge.

How the Judge tries vainly to speak through the hubbub which is at length quelled by the stentorian tones of the Usher's "Silence in court!" is told by the composer with inimitable humour. The Judge's famous solo, the narration of his life's history, from the time when he was first called to the Bar with "an appetite fresh and hearty" till he threw over "the rich attorney's elderly ugly daughter" who could "very well pass for forty-three, In the dusk with the light behind her"—this solo is, of course, a mere comic song, in which the words are paramount and the music adequately simple, as it should be. Sullivan was never more awake to his responsibilities than when he "did nothing in particular and did it very well," of which this is an early and decidedly happy instance.

The entrance of the Plaintiff (radiantly clad, of course, in full bridal attire!) together with her bevy of bridesmaids, brings the composer into prominence again, and there is a return of the French delicacy and *entrain* in the orchestration, as a setting for a quite bewitching little English melody sung by the ladies in concert, with a tender refrain:

Ex. 4. *Allegro grazioso*

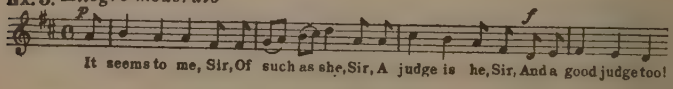


The excited and susceptible Jurymen clamour for "substantial damages," and a touch of humour at this point (which is apparently the composer's and not the

librettist's) often passes unnoticed in performance. The first syllable of the word "damages" is stressed with growing insistence till the Usher's now familiar call for silence abruptly restores order before the word is completed.

The arguments of Counsel, and the irresponsible song of the Defendant, are well seconded by the musical settings, and the way is paved for a Sestet and Chorus in which the composer, as it were, really spreads himself for the first time. Beginning in the key of E flat, in the mood of a burlesque Italian opera aria, it quickly develops into an elaborate ensemble in ten distinct vocal parts, treated with masterly assurance and rising to a big climax on an unexpected chord of C major. This is the central point of the music, which now becomes high comedy rather than mere farce. We soon descend again to the region of the irresponsible, and press on quickly to the appointed *dénouement*, and a merry Finale with a swinging tune which sets heads nodding and sends everybody away happy and satisfied:

Ex. 5. *Allegro moderato*



The significance of this little operatic miniature is far greater than might be supposed. It not only established Sullivan's reputation as a writer of light music of distinction; it showed that success in the wildest

kind of musical farce was not inconsistent with musical scholarship. It dealt what was almost a death-blow to the vulgarities and levities of Offenbach and his kind, at all events as far as the more musically-inclined section of the British public was concerned. Moreover the welcome it received led to the establishment on a firm basis of a partnership which was responsible for the prolonged series of works with which this book is concerned.

Just as Mozart, in his *Cosi Fan Tutte*, showed that a great musician could deal with trivialities in such a way that they became permanently pleasurable, so Sullivan, compelled by his librettist to disport himself even more ludicrously, never let us forget that he was a genuine musician. If Sullivan was not a Mozart either in native innocence, refinement of expression or finish of detail, yet he had something of that immortal composer's youthful spirits, something of his charm, too, and a command of perhaps an even wider range of rhythmic variety. And, like Mozart, he achieved all of his effects by the simplest means and with the simplest harmonies and modulations.

Trial by Jury, with its continuous musical activity and unflagging humour, is almost the only English comic classic which can, without irreverence, be fairly matched with *Cosi Fan Tutte* in the playground of music.

CHAPTER III

THE PRE-SAVOY OPERAS—I

"THE SORCERER" AND "H.M.S. PINAFORE"

Before proceeding to examine, in some detail, the operatic achievements of Arthur Sullivan, it will be well to pause at this point to consider how far a composer is indebted for his success to the author who provides him with his text. By common consent Sullivan was singularly fortunate in his librettist. In the pleasant game of word-making and word-taking Gilbert and he exhibited a uniformity of skill which led to their names being coupled together on equal terms. It is important to realize the significance of this happy uniformity.

From its earliest days English opera (such as it was) had suffered grievously from the poverty-stricken lines which had been offered to composers for setting. In the seventeenth century, when the great Henry Purcell turned towards the stage for expression he was compelled to do the best he could with the appalling effusions of Nahum Tate and Dryden (who, though in other respects a poet of distinction, laboured under the conviction that any careless doggerel was good enough where music was concerned). Composers of later

generations fared even worse, until, saddled with such hopeless banalities as the books manufactured by Killo, 'the poet' Bunn, George Coleman the younger, Michael Kelly and their like, all chance of the salvation of this form of entertainment in England seemed to have disappeared.

There is little cause for wonder that the profession of librettist fell into disrepute, and that no author of talent ever thought of debasing himself by associating with an art which was content to exist on such a low intellectual plane. The progress of serious opera in this country was therefore checked, and still remains checked by the indifference of men of literary ability to its fate. Composers of to-day, if they desire to write serious operas are compelled either to adapt existing plays (which generally need a great deal of adapting and are seldom really suitable) or to write their own libretti (a task for which few musicians possess the necessary mental equipment or training).

Sullivan, in his youth, had had the bitter experience of setting a libretto which was so hopelessly inept and unworkable that a performance was voted impossible and not even attempted.[1] The circumstance no doubt caused him, twice shy, to move more warily than most composers as far as opera was concerned. Nor was his experience with Burnand in *The Contrabandista* entirely reassuring, though it was, relatively, less unfortunate. Had he not fallen in with Gilbert,

[1] *The Sapphire Necklace*, by H. F. Chorley, written in 1864.

Sullivan might ultimately have preferred to remain a composer of third-rate serious music instead of becoming a brilliant writer of popular light opera. It is simple justice to acknowledge that Gilbert not only provided the necessary stimulus and directed the current of the composer's thoughts, but shared equally in the artistic triumph of each work which bears their two names.

Gilbert was not a musician—he was indeed definitely unmusical—but he had a gift of writing light verse which was tempting to a composer, inasmuch as it experimented in unusual metres and employed an endless variety of rhythmic devices. But more important than this was the fact that, in the words of Cecil Forsyth, he "substituted clear and plain English for the make-believe stage dialect which existed before his day." An opera libretto need not be great literature (hardly any of the finest operas of the world are settings of literary masterpieces), but it should be well and economically constructed, and its language should have sufficient character and force to enable it to give life to its utterance in conjunction with music. Gilbert's best contributions were all this and more, and, though he set his collaborator innumerable problems which would have driven a lesser craftsman to despair, he did, as a general rule, provide the composer with a text which enhanced the effect of the music and helped to make it acceptable and memorable to the listener.

For the successful production of opera, then, a capable musician plus a capable librettist are indispensable; but

there is still another factor which cannot be left out of the reckoning. Christina Rossetti once said that "written notes are not music until they find a voice." One might say, with equal truth, "written operas are not operas until they find a manager." It was not until Gilbert and Sullivan were joined by a smart business man with ambitions on their behalf that they had any chance of carrying their designs into practical effect.

Adair Fitz-Gerald, in his excellent *Story of the Savoy Opera*,[1] which is a volume affording abundant information and entertainment for all who are interested in the vicissitudes of the Gilbert and Sullivan productions and personal details concerning them, tells us a good deal about the circumstances which attended the birth and early fortunes of the second work of the series, *The Sorcerer*. Referring to the success of *Trial by Jury* he mentions that D'Oyly Carte, who was the manager at the Royalty Theatre at the time of its original presentation, was fired with the idea of getting the author and composer to write a longer work together. In the autumn of 1876, we are told, Carte

"secured the assistance of several financial friends who were also interested in music and the drama and founded the Comedy Opera Company, Limited. This business company consisted of many well-known music-publishers and others, with Mr. D'Oyly Carte at the head as managing director, and W. S. Gilbert and Arthur S. Sullivan were 'approached' in regard to providing the piece for the starting of the campaign, with the result that *The Sorcerer* was secured for the opening programme."

[1] Published by Stanley Paul & Co., Ltd., London.

Gilbert, as was his habit, turned over the leaves of his early Bab Ballads and selected one which provided a skeleton of a story for the new opera. It was not, perhaps, a very promising affair. The time-worn device of a 'love-philtre' has done duty in countless books and plays, both serious and humorous. In *The Sorcerer*, however, there are some whimsical ideas which give the old wheeze a semblance of novelty. The philtre is provided by a cockney wizard, John Wellington Wells, "a dealer in magic and spells" of "Seventy Simmery Axe," who mixes the potent love-compelling liquid in a tea-pot at a picnic, and serves it round indiscriminately to the inhabitants of an entire village, with, of course, disastrous results. The humour of all this, it must be confessed, is a little thin and obvious, but Gilbert always depended far less upon the main material or 'plot' for his appeal than upon the incidental situations, upon the idiosyncrasies of his characters and the verbal quibbles in which they delighted. *The Sorcerer*, fitted with Sullivan's music, was eventually completed, suitably cast after many difficulties (it is interesting to recall the fact that George Grossmith was engaged to appear as leading comedian for the first time) and produced at the old Opera Comique Theatre, in the Strand, on November 17, 1877, where it had a run of 175 performances.

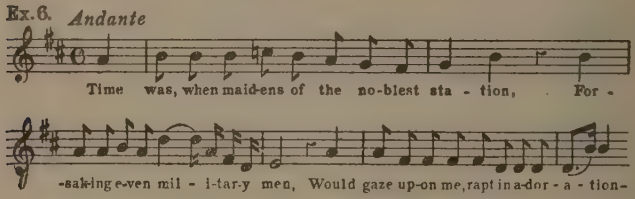
Our present concern, of course, is with the music, and only with the libretto in so far as it governed the composer's methods and stimulated his thoughts. It

is difficult to believe that Sullivan, who had thrown himself so heartily into the mirthful absurdities of *Trial by Jury*, could have been drawn to the new project with anything like the same enthusiasm. Frankly, *The Sorcerer*, from the musical standpoint, is a disappointment after its predecessor, though it is an amusing little opera to see. It has less character than *Trial by Jury*. It sparkles at times, but the bubbles rise rather slowly to the surface. The vocal ensemble writing (with the notable exception of the first Finale) is a little square and primitive, and many of the melodies seem deliberately planned on conventional lines without quite the humour or keen sense of parody of the earlier work.

After an Overture, which is a mere *pot-pourri* of no particular skilfulness, there is an opening chorus which is quite conventionally written. Like the first chorus of *Trial by Jury* it is busy and active, but the springing vivacity of that delightful number is missing, and the tunes are a little lacking in suppleness. Nor is our interest greatly awakened by the appearance of Mrs. Partlet and her comely daughter (with recitatives) or by the latter's plaintive song with its conventional repeated-chord accompaniment. Repeated chords, indeed, do more than their proper share of duty throughout the act. Dr. Daly's Ballad, the famous Vicar's Song (with its burden, "Ah me, I was a pale young curate then!") makes its effect, however, in spite of this sameliness of setting. The melody is not remarkable, but the mock-seriousness of mood is as admirable as

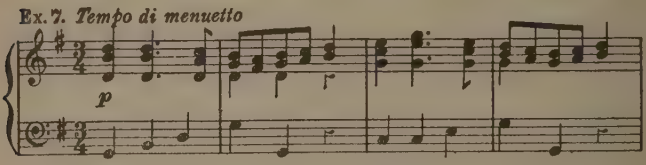
the inevitably apt setting of the words. A mere fragment of the voice-part (not the opening bars) will suffice to illustrate this aptitude.

Ex. 6. *Andante*



A delicate little Minuet, played during the dialogue, generally passes unheeded in performance for that reason, which is a pity. It might almost have been signed by Henry Purcell, of whose genius it is scarcely unworthy.

Ex. 7. *Tempo di menuetto*



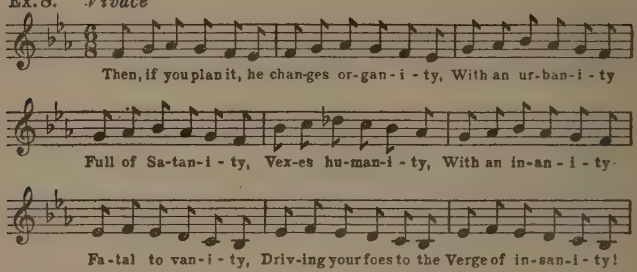
Then follows the first of a chain of three short choruses. It is for girls' voices alone: graceful and flowing in style. Presently, when the men enter, we have another chorus, for tenors and basses only, in which similar words are set to a martial strain which might have been taken bodily from *Maritana* or *The Bohemian Girl* with its bugle-like tune, square shape, and tonic and dominant alternations.

But the composer has something up his sleeve, after

all, which is unsuspected. For, later in the act the graceful melody of the girls is combined with the martial measure of the men in a third chorus, where all participate. This is an early example of a device of which Sullivan grew very fond; it is used with far greater success in some of the later operas, as we shall see.

A duet for Lady Sangazure and Sir Marmaduke Pointdextre (contralto and baritone) is the first item of the piece, however, which exhibits both the true Sullivan charm and the characteristic Sullivan touches. A courtly melody, in gavotte rhythm, alternates with an impatient section in quick semiquavers, sung 'aside.' In the end, as might be expected, the leisurely gavotte is heard in combination with the semiquavers, appearing above and below them in turn. The artistocratic mien of the music is well sustained, and it is capitally written for the voices. Nevertheless the temperature of the opera has grown a little tepid, even before this point, and matters are not improved by the introduction of a love-song for Alexis, with an intensely sentimental refrain in which Sullivan, knowing what tenors are, asks for the worst—and generally gets it. At last John Wellington Wells arrives, in the nick of time to revive our fading spirits, and the laughter begins. Here Sullivan, the humorist, has the opportunity for which he seems to have been waiting—a first-rate, top-speed patter song, worthy of Rossini, with clusters of such four-syllable words as trip readily off the tongue if one happens to be English, but are the despair of the foreigner.

Ex. 8. *Vivace*


Then, if you plan it, he chan-ges or-gan-i - ty, With an ur-ban-i - ty
Full of Sa-tan-i - ty, Vex-es hu-man-i - ty, With an in-an - i - ty
Fa-tal to van-i - ty, Driv-ing your foes to the Verge of in-san-i - ty!

Aided by a little quiet clowning in the orchestra (the bassoon, of course, being requisitioned, but not too persistently) the song is a huge success, and establishes little John Wellington Wells in firm favour with any audience. He is a matchless, a prodigious figure of fun—the most broadly comic character, possibly, in the whole of the Gilbert and Sullivan gallery of eccentrics —and when he takes the stage the Vicar, Sir Marmaduke Alexis, Lady Sangazure, and all the rest drift into the background and become mere lay figures.

Sullivan, from the first, has a great deal to do with this. We are rather bored, and probably he is, too, with the rest of the act except so far as the sorcerer is concerned. Of course the Incantation is supremely well done, with a wonderful economy of notes, and ghostly voices 'heard without'. Then there is the Finale, where the villagers come to enjoy the feast, and partake of the "rollicking bun," the "muffin and toast," the "gay Sally Lunn" the "eggs and the ham," and the "strawberry jam," and the women sing "jam" and the

men sing "bun" (and vice versa) alternately, while the music trips merrily along. Ultimately there is a big ensemble, imposingly laid out, at the climax of which all the characters on the stage, having partaken of the magic potion, fall to the ground in a stupor. There is no denying that Sullivan rose to his one great opportunity in *The Sorcerer* with tremendous vigour and conviction.

In the second act two numbers stand out for quaint charm, though neither of them shows Sullivan quite at his best. These are the Quintet, "She will tend him," with its five-part-harmony refrain, and the song for the Vicar, "Oh, my voice is sad and low," with interludes on his flageolet, sadly out of tune. Somehow, one hardly knows why (perhaps because of the peculiarly childlike innocence of the rhythm) this song is a little reminiscent of Papageno and his bells. For the rest we would forget the sentimental pages, and the trite waltz refrains, which are below the level even of Sullivan at his least attractive. The varied duet for Lady Sangazure and Mr. Wells, however, gives the composer one more comic opportunity which is not lost, indeed the humour of it resides rather in the music than in the words. The last section, with its ridiculous repetitions of the words "the family vault," is particularly amusing. Apart from this Gilbert has not allowed the composer much opportunity of helping on the low-comedy scenes. Sullivan, for his part, certainly misses the best chance which is offered—nothing is made, musically, of the sorcerer's final departure.

The Finale to Act 2 disappoints us terribly from the musical point of view. It is loosely constructed and altogether perfunctory, although it ends cheerily enough with a repetition of the gay part-song about the buns and the jam.

The chief memory most of us must retain of *The Sorcerer* is a picture of that irrepressible little bounder John Wellington Wells careering round the stage in magic circles with a tea-pot in his hand, or descending, amid red fire, into the nether regions and throwing up a handful of professional cards as he departs. The music is a secondary matter.

This is certainly not the case with its successor. Gilbert, for the next production, turned once more to the pages of his own Bab Ballads, selected material which served as the basis of a simple story, and succeeded in constructing a libretto which must always rank amongst the most appealing and clearly defined of all light-opera books. *H.M.S. Pinafore, or The Lass that Loved a Sailor*, as the piece was called, proved at once extraordinarily attractive to the English people, who appreciate above all things any picture of life on board a man-o'-war, however grotesquely it is presented, and are ready to extend their sympathies to the British seaman, no matter in how absurd a guise he may appear. Moreover, the stage scene was copied from the quarterdeck of the old *Victory* in Portsmouth harbour, a scene which, in itself, called up memories of pilgrimages to a national shrine, and which

became peculiarly vitalized when it was peopled by a gallant Captain and a picturesque crew embracing all the familiar story-book types of sailor life. Add to these the Captain's fair daughter Josephine (with high soprano notes); a 'plump and pleasing person' in the guise of a Bumboat woman (who hides in her ample bosom a secret which is to provide the *dénouement*); a self-important First Lord of the Admiralty (a light comedian who stuck to his desk and never went to sea, and so became the Ruler of the Queen's Navee) surrounded by an engaging bevy of his sisters and his cousins and his aunts, who follow him about everywhere for the purpose of forming a female chorus (pairing off, as a matter of course, with the sailors in the end)—and here, as Peter Quince said, is a play fitted.

Sullivan's music for *H.M.S. Pinafore* was written during a period of great physical suffering. He was only able to work at his score bit by bit, breaking off in exhaustion to lie prostrate on his bed for half-an-hour at a time. Of this disability the opera shows not a trace. Few will contend that *Pinafore* contains Sullivan's best work, for as a composer of light music he had not yet reached his maturity, but it is as a whole the most spontaneous in expression and the most frankly popular in style of all his operas. For the majority of music-lovers to-day it belongs to the category of things which have become so familiar that they cannot any longer be viewed critically. It is full of music which gives the man known in broadcasting circles as the

'ordinary listener' what he most wants—tunes. His counterpart fifty years ago, the person who supported musical plays in the seventies and early eighties, though not otherwise hard to please, was extremely exacting and dogmatic in this matter.

Planquette's *Les Cloches de Corneville*, first produced in England in May 1878 (the same month and year in which *H.M.S. Pinafore* appeared) was long regarded as a kind of standard of tunefulness, and it was customary to criticize even Sullivan for not being so generous in his melodic supply as the composer of that famous example. But *Pinafore*, it had to be admitted, ran it very close—in spite of the fact that it was written by a very distinguished musician.

What the 'ordinary listener' of to-day, no less than his predecessor, means when he says he wants tunes is, of course, tunes which make an immediate appeal to him, and can be whistled on the way home without difficulty. To achieve this end the composer who is fortunate enough to think of such tunes must neither be ashamed of them nor wilfully hide them by mixing them too freely with other products of his invention. They must move with energy, with grace and with clarity—and the greatest of these is clarity. Sullivan knew this, and possessing the power of creating melodies which quickened the pulse, had too much respect for his public to cheat them of what they most desired. Other composers have prided themselves in being adept at avoiding what people wanted. They have made so

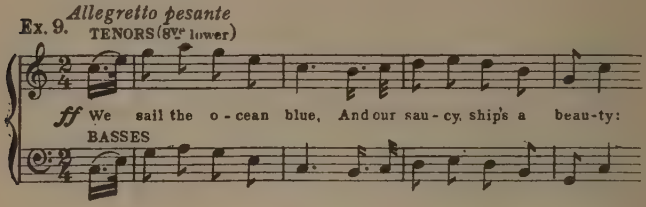
many obvious manœuvres to avoid the obvious, that the result has been a kind of super-obviousness. But, after all, these little tricks and dishonesties are not the marks of the greatest minds. They are the results of over-education, perhaps, or excessive self-consciousness. Sullivan, though he made no pretensions to greatness of mind, luckily suffered from neither of these unfortunate disabilities, and so he allowed his tunes in *Pinafore* to be heard in their native simplicity of garb.

There is perhaps less actual display of premeditated art in this opera than in any of the others of the series. And for that reason, maybe, it appeals almost equally to the musician (as a holiday from the sophistications in which he is so interested) and to the 'ordinary listener' (to whom all music is a holiday). Nevertheless it is a pleasant task to pass in review the successive attractions of a score which gives so much happiness to so many, and to point out, here and there, details which, although contributory to the general impression, have escaped notice and recognition.

The Overture, a string of the best things which are to follow—well put together, too—is followed by a Chorus of Sailors. The long introduction to this, before the curtain rises, is surprisingly elaborate for Sullivan. It traverses a wide range of keys and introduces in turn fragments of themes associated with Josephine, Little Buttercup (the Bumboat Woman) and the Captain. The jolly song of the sailors, when it comes, is full of breezy energy, but curiously enough it is not altogether

effectively written for the voices, especially when the men sing in octaves:

Ex. 9.



Here the tenors are too high at the opening and the basses too low in the third and fourth bars, and the blend of tone is not satisfactory. Sullivan so rarely miscalculated in such matters that the defect jumps to the ear.

The ditty of Little Buttercup, which comes next, quite disarms criticism, and calls for no comment save the one which applies to so many of the songs in *Pinafore*—it is an instance of the artless simplicity which needs no embellishment, and, like the best type of folk-tune, it gains by repetition.

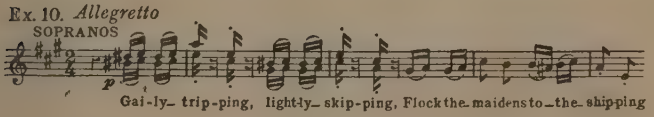
We are then introduced to Ralph Rackstraw, "the smartest lad in all the fleet" (and therefore, of course, a tenor), who has two good songs: the first, "The nightingale sighed for the moon's bright ray," is particularly charming, and neither is disfigured by sentimentalism.

When the Captain appears we have a delicious piece of polite colloquial conversation between him and the crew, set to a parody of serious *recitative*. This leads to one of the best loved numbers of the piece, "I am the Captain of the *Pinafore*," with its immortal tag—

"What never?" "No, never!" "What, *never?*" "Hardly ever!" set, as everybody knows, to musical phrases which, once heard, are for ever inseparable from the words.

There is true expressive beauty and a kind of Schubertian tenderness in the opening melody of Josephine's first song, "Sorry her lot who loves too well," which is a little marred, it must be confessed, by a refrain which borders on the commonplace, especially at the cadence. The tripping entrance of the sisters, cousins and aunts is, however, a shining example of a dainty mood which Sullivan always achieved supremely well.

Ex. 10. *Allegretto*

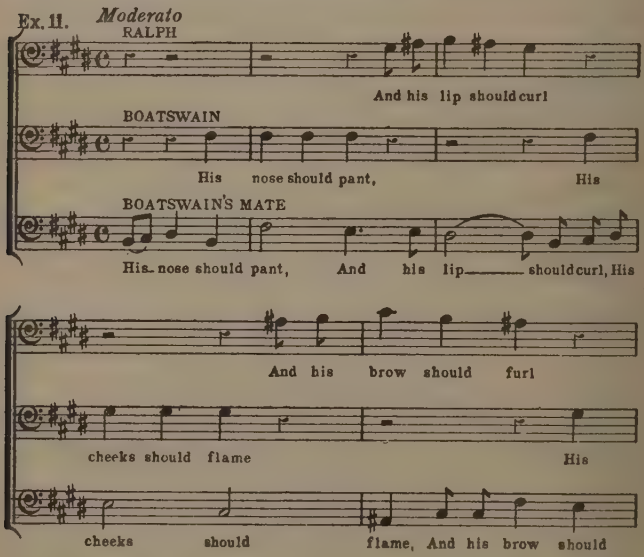


The ultimate use of this delicate measure in combination with the tune of the sailors' chorus (Ex. 9), is one of the aptest examples of this device in the whole of the Sullivan repertory.

What is one to say of the arrival of Sir Joseph Porter, the Ruler of the Queen's Navee, of the insistence of his feminine relations in associating themselves with his sentiments ("And *so* do his sisters and his cousins and his aunts"), of the historical account of his gradual rise to fame and distinction? These belong once more to the order of things so indubitably right that recognition is immediate and comment superfluous.

More can be said about the unaccompanied Trio for

Ralph, the Boatswain and the Boatswain's mate. In this the singers are supposed to be reading at sight a composition specially written by the versatile Sir Joseph, and there are some points of subtle humour which are not too readily detected by the average audience. The Boatswain's mate is obviously a better sight-reader than his companions, and when the music becomes contrapuntal they lose confidence, and sing mere broken fragments in repeated notes, only "getting in" again rather tamely, in unison with each other!

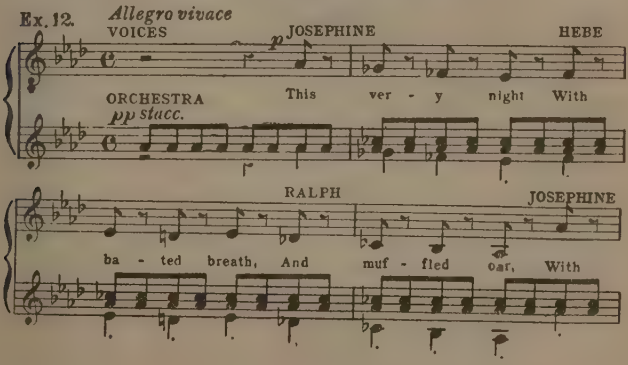


The chorus saves the situation by butting in with a hearty hornpipe, just as the Boatswain's mate is

laboriously descending the scale to his low E. The whole thing is splendidly done, and is yet another instance which proves that Sullivan, apart from his purely musical accomplishments, was every whit as inventive a humorist as his collaborator.

The duet for Josephine and Ralph, with its alternating moods of scorn and submission, is clearly effective, and the prolonged Finale to the Act, dealing with the elopement of Ralph with the Captain's daughter (not too well devised, it may be said, by the librettist) is full of good vocal writing. One striking feature here is the prominence given in the music to the personality of Dick Deadeye, the ugly genius of the piece, who forces his unpopular views upon his companions. His biting commentaries are given special incisiveness by the composer, who always contrives that they shall come through clearly. The section in which the characters express their excitement in breathless whispers is unusually graphic in style for Sullivan:

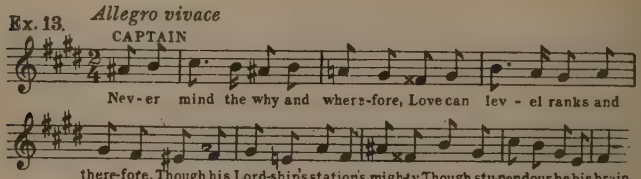
Ex. 12.



These fragments continue until the chorus joins in with hushed detached chords, above which is spread a soaring melody for Josephine with the sopranos in 3–2 time—another admirably executed effect. The Finale ends with the lilting nautical melody which opened the overture, and a most effective and brilliantly worked-up version of the Hornpipe which was based on the struggling efforts of the Trio of sight-readers (Ex. 11).

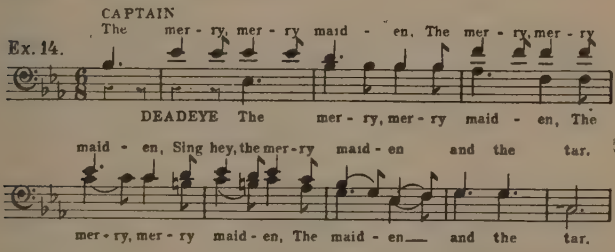
There is nothing in Act II on quite the same scale as the biggest numbers in the first act. Nevertheless the music is always alive, and quite equally melodious. The duet for Buttercup and the Captain, a collection of rhyming aphorisms beginning "Things are seldom what they seem," is the first item to arrest special attention by the felicity of its setting: the long solo for Josephine has its admirers, no doubt, but it is more remarkable for vocal effectiveness than for its originality. The Trio for Josephine, the Captain and the First Lord ("Never mind the why and wherefore") is certainly better than either: it is indeed one of the most immediately attractive and vivacious features of the score, for it dances along from start to finish, with a rhythmic tune which it would be hard to match anywhere for sheer "catchiness" and sportive gaiety:

Ex. 13. *Allegro vivace*


CAPTAIN
Nev-er mind the why and where-fore, Love can lev - el ranks and
there-fore, Though his Lord-ship's station's migh-ty Though stu-pendous be his brain,

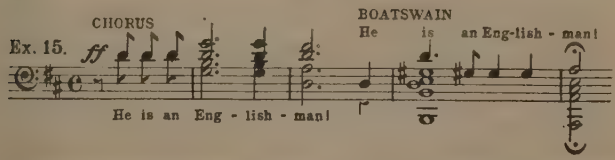
The utmost simplicity of outline, too, suffices for Dick Deadeye's sneaking interview with the Captain, which is carried on in duet form, and contains some excellent musical dialogue. The two voices share the interest equally and (what is more vital) really sound well when they sing together.

Ex. 14.


CAPTAIN
The mer - ry, mer - ry maid - en, The mer - ry, mer - ry
DEADEYE The mer - ry, mer - ry maid - en, The
maid - en, Sing hey, the mer - ry maid - en and the tar.
mer - ry, mer - ry maid - en, The maid - en and the tar.

The most memorable of all the long string of good tunes that *Pinafore* reveals to us is, nevertheless, yet to come, and it brings a subordinate character, the Boatswain, into sudden and unexpected prominence. Let us see with what a valiant gesture the big moment is approached. Ralph, defying the Captain, sings "I am an Englishman," a statement which inspires his fellow-sailors to heroic enthusiasm and their finest high notes:

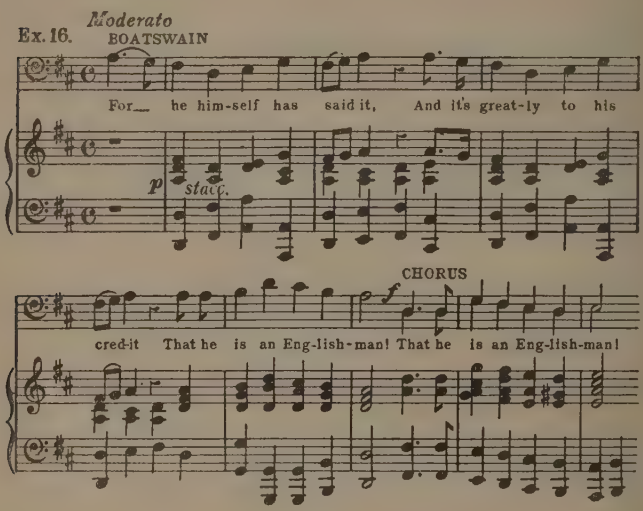
Ex. 15.



Then comes the real thing. The librettist is making us laugh, but the composer is in earnest. Sullivan is

never more successful than when he exalts Gilbert's humour with a gravity of style which reaches a high level of impressiveness:

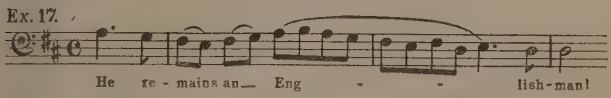
Ex. 16.



This is not merely a good tune: it is a glorious tune. It thrills us and warms us as very few English tunes do. Place it side by side, say, with *Rule Britannia*. In spite of Wagner's opinion that Arne's tune embodied the essential characteristics of the English race, we, who are Englishmen, know that it was simply 'Handelian' English—the florid exaggeration of patriotism. Sullivan's tune has not a trace of bombast in it, only a very strong self-conscious pride expressed in a spontaneous outburst of song. There is not a weak bar in it, or a redundant

note. The cadence in particular (sometimes described, quite erroneously, as a *melisma*) is a striking instance of a real *fioritura* close which strengthens the melody and in no wise dissipates its dignity or makes it sound artificial:

Ex. 17.



After this point there is little more to be said of the music of *Pinafore*. Apart from Little Buttercup's quite undramatically treated disclosure, which tells how, "a-many years ago," she mixed up the two babies, and how Ralph was really the Captain and the Captain really Ralph—apart from this precious nonsense (which he gets over as quickly as possible) the composer has little more to do but gather up the reins and, in a Finale specially designed for the purpose, trot through a repetition of some of the best of those good tunes which everybody wants to hear again, ending heroically enough with a broadened version of the fervid *fioritura* cadence in praise of the Englishman.

H.M.S. Pinafore was originally presented to the public at the Opera Comique Theatre on May 25, 1878. It was not at first a complete success. Later in the summer it happened that Sullivan was conducting a series of Promenade Concerts at Covent Garden, and one night an orchestral selection from the new opera was included in the programme. This brought the tunes to the ears

of a more definitely musical public, who went wild with delight, insisted on a triple encore, and thereafter began to flock to the theatre themselves. The opera ran for nearly two years in London. It had a prodigious success also in the United States. In New York it is said that at one time *H.M.S. Pinafore* was the principal attraction at four separate theatres simultaneously. Unfortunately, owing to the absurd injustice of the copyright laws of those days, this brought nothing to the coffers of the author or composer—nor had they the power to prevent unauthorized performances, or even the public presentation of pieces in which their ideas were shamelessly plagiarized.

Nevertheless the fame of the Gilbert and Sullivan partnership was established on two continents, and expectations ran high regarding a successor to a work which had already almost assumed the importance of a national musical classic.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRE-SAVOY OPERAS—II

"THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE" AND "PATIENCE"

Nothing could have been more promising than the setting Gilbert chose for the new piece which was to succeed *H.M.S. Pinafore*. The rocky Cornish coast formed a most romantic background ; a chorus of pirates (dressed in the approved tuppence-coloured garb of juvenile drama) provided dominating notes of picturesque colouring and movement. For contrast there was an elderly but agile Major-General in uniform, together with his family of grown-up daughters (necessarily numerous enough to constitute a full choir of sopranos and contraltos), whilst, for the broader humours of the second act there was a stolid band of policemen, with a preposterous low-comedy Sergeant at their head.

Given such essentials and such appurtenances the true comic-opera spirit was assured and the story mattered little. As a matter of fact this was largely a repetition of *Pinafore*, a little more heavily burdened with extravagant details, perhaps, and not quite so pleasant or spontaneous in its fun, but as a whole a brilliant skit upon the lurid type of melodrama, which, one must remember, was in those days regarded quite seriously

by the public. The characters, once more, were stage-types, absurdly exaggerated. The situations in which they were placed, and the ease with which they finally emerged from tight corners, were equally incredible. The quips and quibbles of the dialogue were even more far-fetched and ridiculous than before. It is possible, indeed, that by going further the author's humour fared worse. The composer, provided with some fresh opportunities for extending his outlook, accepted this rampant burlesque in the spirit in which it was offered, as we shall see, and furnished it with a score which was mainly a somewhat bald travesty of conventional Grand Opera.

The Pirates of Penzance, or The Slave of Duty (to give the piece its full title) was first heard in London, at the Opera Comique Theatre, on April 3, 1880. It had actually been produced in New York during the previous December (to safeguard the rights of the author and composer who had suffered so lamentably in the case of *Pinafore*) and, owing to the peculiar state of our own copyright laws at the time, there was also a merely formal performance in the little Devon town of Paignton, which synchronized with this American production. The new entertainment thus embarked upon its London career with a sense of security, and proved sufficiently attractive to hold the stage for 363 consecutive performances.

Musically *The Pirates of Penzance* is not one of the most distinguished operas of the Sullivan series. It has neither quite the melodic freshness nor the originality of *H.M.S. Pinafore*. There is some advance to be noted,

possibly, in the increased brightness of the orchestration. The few opportunities for daintiness of expression, also, are seized upon with complete success and show some freshly acquired skill in dealing with delicate outlines. But apart from this, and a few brief moments of exquisite tenderness, there are too many evidences of the composer's almost oppressive eagerness to write in a frankly popular style. He seems almost too ready to accept the first rhythmic plan that comes to hand without pausing to select, as he generally did. Perhaps some of Gilbert's jingling rhythms were altogether too insistent to be evaded, but there is certainly too great a preponderance of pattering repeated notes, and the incessant jigging of the obvious 6–8 lilt becomes a tiresome feature when it is prolonged to the extent that Sullivan allows it to be in this opera. As marked instances it is only necessary to cite the Major-General's ditty in the first Finale, beginning "I'm telling a terrible story," with the chorus which follows it, which falls far below the level of what one would expect from the composer of *Pinafore*; also the chorus, "O happy day," to which the same comment applies equally well. Triviality, however, is one thing and vulgarity another, and unfortunately *The Pirates of Penzance* cannot altogether be acquitted of the latter and more serious charge.

Now Sullivan in his light music is very rarely vulgar: it is when he embarks upon serious works on an imposing scale (especially sacred works) that he crosses the border-line and offends our sensibilities.

This is not to accuse the composer of a lack of sincerity. Sincerity and vulgarity are not incompatible. There are, for instance, marked vulgarities in the "In Memoriam" overture, sincere though it undoubtedly is, but few in any of the comic operas where such high sincerity is not to be looked for. Similarly it is in the more imposing pages of *Ivanhoe* that we are painfully conscious of the same defect, not by any means in the splendid exuberance of "Ho, jolly Jenkin."

Perhaps in *The Pirates of Penzance* it is the presence of something of the grand opera manner that causes us to feel somewhat keenly the few places where the tunes lose quality and become popular in a rather bad sense, or what is called 'cheap.' Naturally listeners are not all alike. Some are susceptible to the smallest infraction of what may be termed the proprieties of music—others can listen with enjoyment to anything which is *alive* without permitting any such fastidiousness to mar their pleasure. Some musicians can endure even the middle section of the Soldiers' Chorus in *Faust* without a squirm —others are positively offended by the frankness of, say, The Toreador's Song in *Carmen* which, to most of us, is a splendid stirring tune.

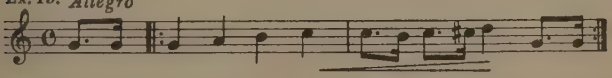
But even making allowances for wide differences of mental constitution one can compile a kind of black-list of tunes in *The Pirates* which are likely to cause discomfort to the really musical.

This list would positively include the song and chorus, "With cat-like tread," especially its refrain, beginning:

Ex. 18. *Allegro marziale*

It might include, also, some of the Finale to Act I, most of which, however, is (like the Major-General's ditty already referred to) trivial rather than vulgar. It certainly could not omit the first song of the Sergeant of the Police, "When the foeman bares his steel," and some of the long ensemble which follows it, in particular the repeated phrase:

Ex. 19. *Allegro*



Since these strictures may puzzle and even disgust some of the whole-hearted uncritical devotees of Sullivan, one hastens to add that the black-list would certainly not include the Pirates' chorus with which the opera opens, or the Major-General's famous patter-song, or the still more famous melody which tells us that "a Policeman's lot is not a happy one (happy *one*)." These are clearly examples of unforced music which are the essence of healthiness and simple joy. The quality of obviousness which they possess has nothing to do with what one may describe as the lack of quality which spells vulgarity in the black-listed numbers.

It may be argued that things like the Sergeant's first song are sheer burlesque, and that comic Policemen call for the methods of the music-hall or the circus. But these circumstances cannot altogether condone the

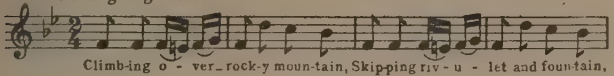
lapse, or justify inherent vulgarity in an opera which aims at a certain unity of expression. The burlesque pages of *Pinafore* or *The Mikado* never affront us in this way, and a critic is entitled to judge a composer by his own highest standard.

Notwithstanding all this there is a great deal of music in *The Pirates of Penzance* from which normal people and fastidious musicians alike must derive both instant pleasure and lasting pleasure. It is more agreeable to dwell on merits than defects, and one can praise unreservedly the contralto solo for Ruth (the pirate maid-of-all-work) which follows the effective opening chorus. This is a real Sullivan narrative-setting, and provides a happy instance of his favourite alternations between the major and minor key. The vigorous song of the Pirate King is also in the composer's best manner, and the 6–8 rhythm is here used strongly and by no means trivially: the unison outlines are bold and inspiriting and they match the highly-coloured stage setting to perfection. The longish duet for Ruth and Frederic, though more conventional, is also effective enough in emphasizing the dramatic situation.

With the arrival of the numerous progeny of the Major-General (so numerous that we are inclined to wonder if some of his sisters and his cousins and his aunts have not strayed on the scene too), we have a most welcome contrast and change of mood. It is as if the sun suddenly shone upon the sea-shore. The melody which these ladies sing as they trip across the

rocks is most engaging, reminding one of some of the happiest music in *Trial by Jury*:

Ex. 20. *Allegro grazioso*



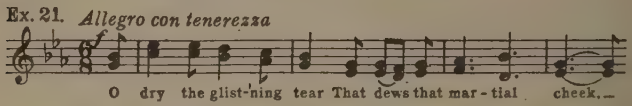
Frederic's passionate appeal for response from any one of them, and the florid interruption from Mabel, which ushers in her conventional waltz-song, are in the best mock-serious strain. The waltz-song itself forms a delightful travesty of the type of operacrobatics (to coin a new portmanteau word) which Gounod and others made so fashionable. Musically it is fully equal to any of the songs it sets out to satirize. What Sullivan himself called the 'farm-yard effects' are so deliciously stupid that innumerable sopranos have taken them quite seriously, to the immense advantage of the parody.

Even better, in felicity of workmanship, is the chattering chorus of girls, where they talk about the weather so as not to interfere with the confidences of the lovers—a chorus broken into by the rapturous phrases of Mabel, who is still addicted to the operatic-waltz style. The ending, where the chattering, in 2–4 time, prevails continuously against the extended waltz melody sung by Mabel and Frederic, is especially good. It seems a thousand pities that after this point the music of Act I drops so quickly into the commonplace and stays there. The Major-General's patter-song gives us a few busy moments of humour, it is true, but except in that the

musical invention fails sadly, and the choral writing is mostly trite and square in the extreme.

The second act, set in a ruined chapel by moonlight, opens with a charming instrumental prelude, which leads to a two-part chorus for the General's daughters —one of the tenderest and most expressive melodies of the opera. This is as good as anything in *Pinafore*, and almost as good as anything of the kind to be found in the later operas. A quotation from the first few bars which are sung can give no idea of the total beauty of the chorus and its setting, but it will at least serve to show the graceful curvature of the melody:

Ex. 21. *Allegro con tenerezza*



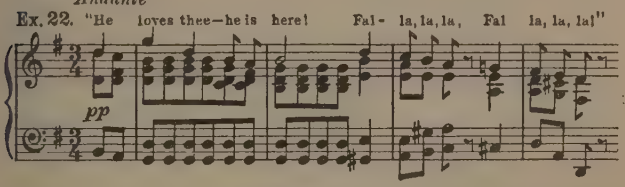
The solo and ensemble which occur when the policemen arrive has already been criticized for the unfortunate character of its tunes. It only remains to be said that there is some skilful blending of these themes, and a broad-comedy finish, where, in operatic fashion, the policemen contrive to chant "We go! We go!" whilst the exasperated Major-General interrupts with a decidedly un-operatic "Yes, but you *don't* go!"—a somewhat primitive comic touch, perhaps, but one which never fails to provoke considerable hilarity in performance.

In the Trio, "A paradox, a paradox, a most ingenious paradox," Sullivan adopts the same style that was so successful in the "Never mind the why and wherefore"

Trio in *Pinafore*. It is a frank copy of this, but justifies the imitation by turning out to be very nearly as exhilarating as its model.

Only one further number seems to demand separate mention here—the tiny "Roundelay," sung by Mabel and her lover, which is perfect of its kind, thoroughly English, and strangely haunting in its simple, shapely loveliness.

Ex. 22. *Andante*



One could wish that Gilbert had given the composer more chances to express, in the pure style which became him so well, such gems of thought as this. But the police intervened and arrested the innocents! Policemen are intolerable in opera, even in comic opera, and one feels that Sullivan was terribly harassed by their presence. For some unaccountable reason they destroy the illusion of the stage, and as soon as the illusion is gone the stage has no use for such a creation of fancy as music.

In assessing the merits of the music to this opera as a whole, one is bound to be influenced, not only by the weaknesses of its worst pages, but by the evidence they give of the composer's distaste for much of what he was doomed to embellish. This thought will arise, on occasion, in discussing some of the other operas, but not even with

The Sorcerer (where it is also strongly forced upon us) is it so paramount or disturbing as it is in the case of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Patience, or Bunthorne's Bride, to give it its full baptismal name, was the next opera of the Gilbert and Sullivan series. It was produced at the Opera Comique Theatre on April 23, 1881.

The sub-title was curiously chosen, reminding one of the famous chapter on "Snakes" in Horrebow's *Natural History of Iceland*, for there was no bride for Bunthorne. By giving a perverse title to a very perverse piece Gilbert, in his whimsical way, evidently meant to emphasize the perversity of the ideas which he set out to lampoon. There was no clumsy heavy-handed fooling here. His satire in *Patience* was biting, but of a very different kind from that in *Pinafore* or the *Pirates*, and the humour was altogether more delicately handled. Its target was a very precious and artificial cult, the cult of Æstheticism.

Those who are old enough to remember how this cult dominated fashionable artistic circles in England, during a particularly unattractive and prosaic period of the nineteenth century, will realize that it was a fitting subject for ridicule, in spite of the fact that many genuine artists and lovers of the beautiful associated themselves with the movement. But just as the extremists amongst literary highbrows to-day make themselves a laughing-stock to normal people, so there were many pretentious

artistic freaks in 1881 whose posings and affectations deserved to be caricatured.

It is a wonderful tribute to the vitality and humour of *Patience* that it has survived so long after the craze which it succeeded in annihilating has been completely forgotten. Indeed if, it were not for this gay little opera few people under fifty-five to-day would know what the so-called æsthetic movement was, or what it affected to stand for. *Patience* alone survives to tell the tale. Nothing but the lasting beauty of the music, surely, could have saved a work which, in its very nature, seemed purely topical and ephemeral to those who listened to it with such amusement in 1881.

The story, if story it can be called, introduces us to some amusing types. Bunthorne was described in the book as 'a fleshly poet,' and he described himself, when, after much floppy posturing, he took the audience into his confidence, as "an æsthetic sham." He was probably intended as a caricature of Oscar Wilde, a leading apostle of the cult, but he is sometimes made-up to represent Whistler. He had everything his own way until a rival appeared in the person of Grosvenor, described as 'an idyllic poet,' who was supposed to be modelled on Swinburne. Between them these twain wrought much havoc amongst the susceptible 'rapturous maidens,' who wore Liberty dresses and intense yearning countenances.

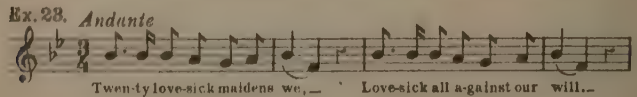
The normal characters of the piece (as far as any of Gilbert's creations could be normal) were Patience, a simple dairymaid, and a trio and chorus of Officers of

the Dragoon Guards. The contrast between Liberty and the despised 'primary colours' of the military uniforms was magnificent. In the end, of course, the commonplace triumphs over the 'ultra-poetical' and the 'super-æsthetical': Grosvenor becomes a 'jolly bank-holiday' young man: the willowy damsels appear attired in the hideous dresses which were worn by ordinary every-day people in the eighties, pair off with the officers, and leave Bunthorne disconsolately lamenting—

"Single I must live and die,
I shall have to be contented
With a tulip or li-*ly*."

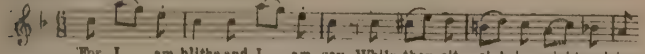
Sullivan treats all of this with a very light hand. There is little in the libretto that calls for vigorous methods of illustration, the Dragoons alone affording opportunities for rhythmic force and martial precision. Few elaborations are indulged in, and as a rule the vocal texture is simpler and the accompaniments more economical (though no less resourceful) than in most of the other operas.

After a bright and effective little medley overture the curtain rises on a charming scene. 'Twenty love-sick maidens' are posing in Burne-Jones attitudes, and they sing a melody as languorous as it is sadly sweet.

Ex. 23. *Andante*

The composer has exactly captured the right mood of quiet intensity here, which serves to heighten the effect of careless gaiety when Patience makes her first appear-

ance with a recitative and plaintive air, "I cannot tell what this love may be." This is one of the freshest and most engaging of Sullivan's innocent songs, with a burden which prances like a happy child on a Spring morning:

Ex. 24. *Allegretto grazioso*

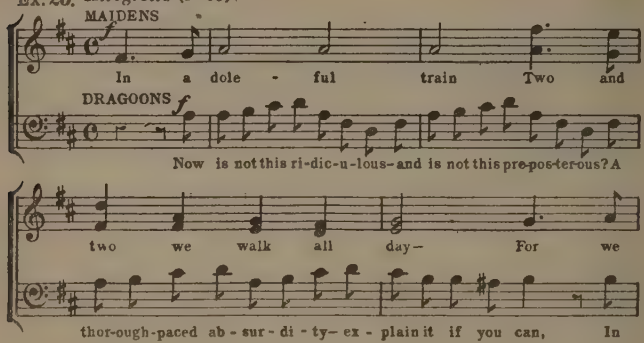


With the entrance of the Dragoons we have music which affords a contrast so sharp that, in these surroundings, it seems at first almost blatant. The Colonel's patter-song (by now we have come to realize that in the Gilbert and Sullivan world high officials of the Army and Navy are expected to patter) is equal to the best of its kind, it emphasizes the agility of the words, is unhampered by elaborations in the orchestra, and has a good tune.

This is followed by one of those deftly-planned ensembles, with intervening solos, where the ladies sing a melody, the men sing a totally different melody, and then they sing them both together. The ways of presenting this effect had, after several experiments, become well established by this time, and no Sullivan opera could be considered complete without at least one example of the device. In *Patience* it is achieved with less fuss and complication than it is anywhere else, and so one may, perhaps, quote a portion of the two melodies, as they appear in conjunction, as a salient instance of the composer's facility in writing serviceable free counterpoint. On the top we have the sad meditative phrases of the love-

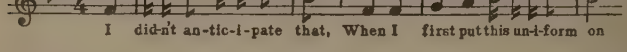
lorn maidens, and, below, the bustling impatience of the baffled Dragoons. The passage is, of course, accompanied, but the accompaniment is omitted to save space:

Ex. 25. *Allegretto* (♩=66).


MAIDENS
In a dole - ful train Two and
DRAGOONS
Now is not this ri-dic-u-lous-and is not this pre-pos-ter-ous? A
two we walk all day— For we
thor-ough-paced ab - sur - di - ty- ex - plain it if you can, In

A second song for the Colonel ensues—a fine, glowing, soldierly tune which accords splendidly with the bright helmets and clanking sword-sheaths. No one who has heard *Patience* can possibly forget the final lines, or the ardent emphasis with which the music drives them home:

Ex. 26. *Allegro marziale*



No better example of military rhythm exists in English music than this tremendously stirring song with its swaggering refrain. One remembers that Sullivan was the son of an Army Bandmaster, which makes it easy to believe that he here embodies, perhaps unconsciously, some juvenile recollections of the barrack-square.

In Bunthorne's somewhat sententious recitative—the frank confession of the *poseur*—the librettist is to the fore and the composer in the background, but the background is very skilfully and amusingly sketched in. In particular the rhythmic setting of

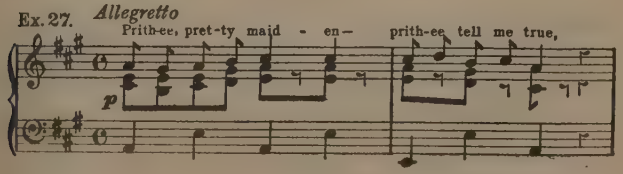
"This air severe
Is but a mere
Veneer!"

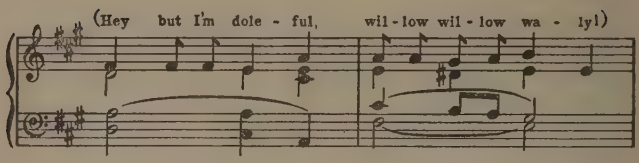
with strong chords on the weak beats, forms a clever piece of satirical musical illustration.

The song which follows is again an example of Sullivan's readiness to accept a secondary position: in essentials it is a little commonplace, but it is enlivened and saved from triviality by delicate independent touches in the accompaniment, notably those which grace the final lines of each verse.

The duet for Patience and Angela may be passed over as devoid of special significance; it is, perhaps, a little too definitely Mendelssohnian in its final phrases. Not so the succeeding duet for Patience and Grosvenor, which is not only typical Sullivan but, in many respects, the melodic gem of the opera. No folk-song is more haunting in its rustic simplicity than this, and the unpretentious harmonization (mainly in four parts for strings) seems inevitably the right setting:

Ex. 27. *Allegretto*

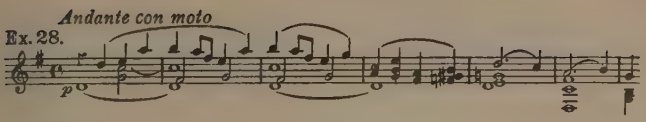




The whole melody is of a piece with the opening—naïve and wistful, with cadences which are especially beautiful. It is but twelve bars long and is repeated four times with only the tiniest variants in the accompaniment, but there is no danger of boredom. As with Mozart the symmetry of expression is so perfect that it gains with repetition. Of how few pieces of transparent simplicity, outside Mozart, can this be said !

The Finale to the First Act is varied, but a little unequal, and a little patchy. The maidens' chorus with which it opens has a kind of floating Grecian grace which is most attractive. After this the spectacle of the effeminate Bunthorne putting himself up "to be raffled for" is, perhaps, hardly an inspiring situation for a musician to illustrate. With the entrance of Patience, however, the music becomes re-vivified. Her first solo, "If there be pardon in your breast," is extremely effective, and the chorus supplies some forceful commentaries which are planned on bold lines. Her second solo (with the constant ejaculations of "exactly so" from Bunthorne and others) is a good deal less satisfactory from the musical standpoint, but it is followed by a Sestet which always proves one of the surest successes of the opera. A delicious little introduction arrests attention at once:

Ex. 28.

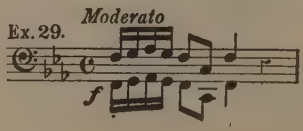


To what does this lead? A solemn hymn-tune in six parts, so strongly suggestive of a once-popular setting of "The Pilgrims of the Night" that the resemblance is probably intentional. The six voices are unaccompanied, save for a few soft notes in the orchestra now and again, and the quiet entry of the chorus in the last stanza. This is undoubtedly a sheer parody of the quasi-religious Victorian part-song, such as Sullivan himself was wont to perpetrate so readily in his least sincere moments. The composer's tongue is in his cheek all the time and he probably enjoyed the luxury of burlesquing himself at his worst. But the music is invariably taken quite seriously, as a piece of sad sentiment, by audiences, and encored—to the further detriment of the sequence of the action which, already, it serves to interrupt. The introduction, however (Ex. 28), which is so much more genuinely felt than what it introduces, is not allowed to be forgotten. Its use after the Sestet is over affords what is amongst the most charming pieces of inventive continuity we can find in Sullivan's work. Passing through a succession of unexpected keys, these flowing phrases accompany the entrance of Grosvenor, "whose god-like grace Proclaims he comes of noble race." The situation is suddenly ridiculous. The maidens desert Bunthorne to

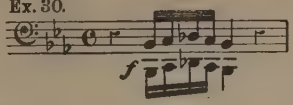
fall at the feet of a new hero. But the music continues to weave a spell. As Pooh-Bah would say, it gives "artistic verisimilitude to a bald and unconvincing narrative," and leads, through some felicitous declamatory passages, to a quite brilliant choral section, short, but laid out on operatic lines and splendidly built up for both voices and orchestra. Despite interruptions, and some weak moments, this is a notable Finale, with a singularly distinguished climax.

The second act opens with the famous musical monologue for Lady Jane, a middle-aged æsthete who might literally be described as a stout supporter of the movement. She is supposed to be accompanying herself on a kind of mediæval double-bass. It is a remarkably amusing scene. It is not clear how much of the humour was Gilbert's invention and how much Sullivan's. Probably Sullivan was responsible for most of it. Lady Jane, alone of the rapturous maidens, remains faithful to Bunthorne, but she is conscious that her charms are "ripe" and already beginning to decay. She must win him before it is too late. Her reflections are enforced with vehement scrapings on her instrument. The funniest strokes of all accompany the lines—

Compelled, at last, in life's uncertain gloamings,

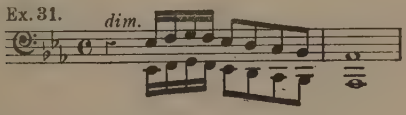
Ex. 29.

To wreathe her wrinkled brow with well-saved "combings,"

Ex. 30.



Reduced (grunt), with rouge, (grunt) lip-salve, (another grunt) and pearly grey,

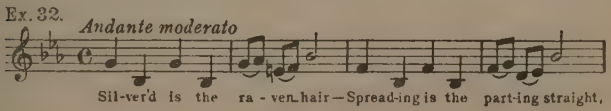
Ex. 31.



To "make up" for lost time as best she may!

And then comes the rich, mock-tragic calm of the well-known contralto melody, "Silver'd is the raven hair."

Ex. 32.



This is a master-stroke, for the words, though amusing, are not in the best of taste. The music, in treating them so tenderly, softens the ugliness of the ideas and makes it possible to receive them without any sense of disgust.

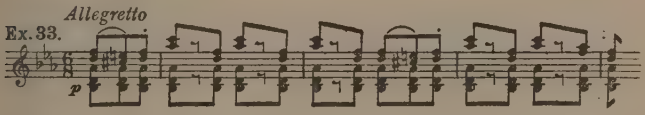
From this point onward *Patience* consists chiefly of a succession of lively popular numbers which give pleasure without approaching, in musical merit, the best of what has gone before. The witty legend of "The Magnet and the Churn" (Gilbert at his happiest) has by some been accounted the most excellent example of all Sullivan's settings in merry mood. It is certainly an exhilarating song with a lilt which hits off the humour

of the lyrics in exactly the right way. But it is the rhythm rather than the tune which attracts us—a rhythm which never falters or fails to emphasize each word of the text in a natural and inevitable way. The same merits are to be found in the bright duet for Lady Jane and Bunthorne. Patience's solo, "Love is a plaintive song," which comes between these two rhythmical settings, makes a different kind of appeal. Here the tune-shape is all that matters, and the rhythmic scheme is purely elementary. The result unfortunately serves to show how much less interesting Sullivan's music becomes directly it ceases to depend upon rhythm for its interest. This song is an example of Sullivan at his very weakest. The waltz-like refrain, in particular, is quite without that touch of personal distinction which nearly always saves his most unpretentious settings from poverty. In music where tune is all that matters we are perhaps entitled to ask for a less commonplace pattern of tunefulness than this, from a composer of genius. Nevertheless how easily the song flows, and how shapely and natural are its obvious melodic curves ! From the first its popularity must have been a foregone conclusion.

The halting, angular music of the Trio sung by the officers of the Dragoons, who in order to appeal to the ladies have discarded their uniforms and donned æsthetic garb, possesses a far more definite character. The exaggerated attitudinizing of the three comedians is accompanied by a jerky melody which forms a capitally

sustained piece of musical fooling. Equally refreshing is the dancing Quintet, in which the Rossini-like brightness of the orchestral setting counts for far more than the vocal outlines. The opening symphony is delightful, and so are the nimble little interludes with their crisp bouncing rhythms:

Ex. 33.



With this gay Quintet *Patience* as an opera may be said to finish. The librettist allowed the composer to say no more. The duet for Bunthorne and Grosvenor is not of any account musically. Sullivan set the jingling words of this in a manner that made them the only thing to listen to, with alternating tonic and dominant harmonies, as one might treat a nursery rhyme such as Little Jack Horner. It was probably the best way to do it. There is no proper Finale, but the gaiety of the evening is easily maintained, and a *reprise* of the Quintet makes a cheery and adequate finish while we are feeling for our hats and coats.

Patience enjoyed an initial run of 408 performances, and it was during its happy career that the Savoy Theatre, specially built by D'Oyly Carte for these operas, was opened. On October 10, 1881, *Patience* was transferred to the new house, which was destined to be the birthplace of all the succeeding works for which Gilbert and Sullivan were jointly responsible.

CHAPTER V

THE SAVOY OPERAS—I

"IOLANTHE" AND "PRINCESS IDA"

It has been said that the best Gilbert and Sullivan opera is the one you heard last. But it is probable that each admirer, viewing the series calmly in perspective, has his special favourite. The present writer confesses to a decided preference for *Iolanthe, or The Peer and the Peri*. In this opera, which was first presented to the public at the Savoy Theatre on November 25, 1882, three nights after the withdrawal of *Patience*, the librettist and composer are both clearly at their best, and the mating of words and music seems even more perfect than usual.

The plot and *mise-en-scène* of *Iolanthe* are uniquely humorous. The basic idea of a fairy punished by her queen for marrying a mortal was not, perhaps, an entirely new one, but the fantastic results of the union—the existence of a son who was a fairy down to the waist with a couple of human legs, who grew older whilst his mother remained for ever at sweet seventeen, and who was compelled, by fairy decree, to enter Parliament in order to play havoc with the constitutional usages of that dignified assembly—these were whimsical corollaries

which not only bore the stamp of novelty but opened up a fine field for the display of Gilbert's wittiest faculties. Never had his ridicule been so devoid of the sting of bitterness as here, even though current politics formed the chief target of his satire. Never had he devised such deliciously inconsequent situations. Never had flippancy flirted so gaily with solemnity, or laughter, fantasy, sentiment and even pathos jostled so ludicrously against each other.

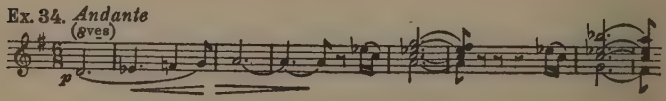
The opportunities for contrasts in mood and colour which Gilbert provides in *Iolanthe* were exactly what appealed most to the musician. It is the only opera of the series which deals with fairies, and in the writing of his fairy music Sullivan, who had already shown much fancy in dealing with the supernatural element in *The Tempest*, was evidently rejoicing in a return visit to the regions of his youthful delight. And, apart from the fairies, there was abundant scope for musical illustration of a varied kind. The dainty Dresden-china figures of Phyllis and Strephon, the pomp and pageantry of the gorgeously robed Peers, the volatile silhouette of the dapper little Lord Chancellor, the imperturbable Sentry in traditional vermilion—these were all, we may be sure, inspiring factors for a composer whose skill in giving musical expression to outward characteristics was so great.

It was almost as if he was called upon to embody the whole of Polonius's catalogue of dramatic possibilities in terms of music—"tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or

poem unlimited." For the "law of writ and the liberty" we might well say Sullivan was the only man. He was an adept, too, in the art of doing nothing in particular and doing it very well. The least intrusive of composers, he knew when a note or two, well-placed amongst the rests, was sufficient to enforce some verbal point. The restraint he exercised throughout this opera was astonishing. Others of his works might be more brilliant, more easily remembered or more lovable, but none were so varied, so economical or so ingeniously fanciful, as *Iolanthe*—and, in addition, there was the superb pageantry of the Peers, of which more will be said in the proper place.

The charm of the work begins to exercise its spell with the very first notes of an overture which is (with one possible exception—that of *The Yeomen of the Guard*) the most delectable of all the preludes which Sullivan provided for his operas. The mysterious little modal-scale figure is followed by a fairy call on the wood-wind, which, even before we know its later application, seems to breathe the name Iolanthe.

Ex. 34. *Andante* (8ves)

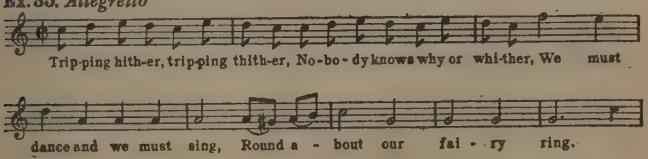


The themes which ensue are all drawn from the opera itself and, though they are nearly all either fairy-like or pastoral in style and 6–8 rhythms are almost continuously employed, there is no feeling of monotony

in the music. A striking use is made of the 'Captain Shaw' refrain (Ex. 44) from the Fairy Queen's song in Act II, which first emerges through a maze of fluttering staccato quavers, and is ultimately made the basis of a broad and majestic coda.

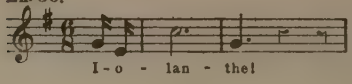
When the curtain rises upon an Arcadian landscape we witness the most delicate fairy revels, and listen to the most enchanting fairy chorus, in which even the voices seem to dance, lightly, in unison with the fairy feet. How subtle a command of rhythmic variety the composer displays here will be best shown, perhaps, by a brief quotation from a section of the melody:

Ex. 85. *Allegretto*



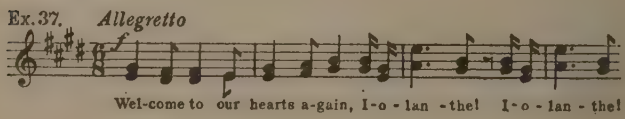
In due course the Fairy Queen enters. She is a purely Gilbertian creation (for who but Gilbert would have provided these dainty creatures of fancy with an extremely stolid and portly chief?) and, in response to the appeal of her subjects, she summons Iolanthe, who, since her banishment twenty-five years before, has been living "among the frogs" at the bottom of the river. The Invocation is a varied and beautiful piece of imaginative writing, unlike anything else in Sullivan's music. After a dignified recitative for the Queen, the fairies give the oft-repeated call:

Ex. 36.



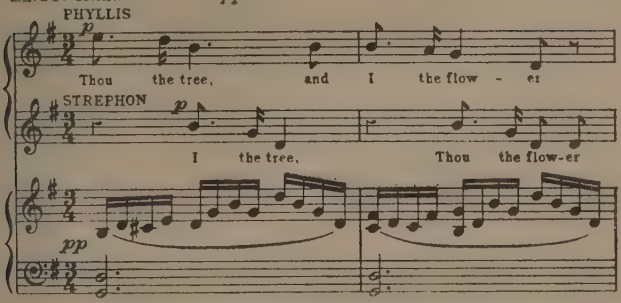
There is a touching little oboe solo when the figure of Iolanthe rises from the river covered with water-weeds, followed by a few whispered words of submission and homage, after which, at the Queen's pronouncement of pardon, the music reaches a climax. As the fairies gather round their restored playfellow they sing a glad song of welcome for which the overture has already prepared us, a melody which once more embodies the lovely phrase of the fairy call.

Ex. 37. *Allegretto*



A complete change of mood is effected with the pastoral strain which accompanies the entrance of Iolanthe's son Strephon, dancing to the merry notes of his shepherd's pipe, and singing "For I'm to be married to-day." He seems to have stepped straight out of a Watteau picture, and the slightly artificial simplicity of the music is perfectly in keeping. Similar pastoral phrases herald the appearance of Phyllis, his lover, and there is an exquisite love-duet with a refrain in which the two voices answer one another tenderly, whilst the orchestra supplies a limpid stream of semiquavers.

Ex.38. *Andante non troppo lento*

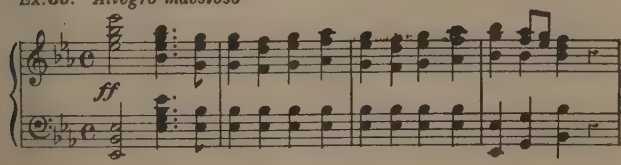


Immediately the last soft notes of this duet have died away a smart fanfare heralds the approach of the Peers in stately array.

"As upon its lordly way
This unique procession passes"

there is a blare of brass and a rattle of drums, while the stage becomes garishly furnished with colour. It is a truly magnificent piece of consciously aristocratic music, pompous in rhythm and finely sustained in melody, as the fragment of one prominent section given below will testify:

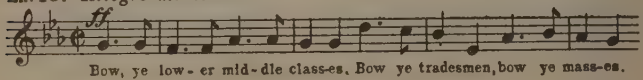
Ex.39. *Allegro maestoso*



The words, too, are set in a way which shows off the most sonorous registers of the men's voices to perfection,

with bold changes of key as the phrases are transferred from the tenors to the basses. The biggest passage (too long to quote) is that which begins on page 45 of the vocal score, working up gradually on a dominant pedal, and leading to the final climax, where, with crashing chords on the weak beats of each bar, all the voices join in a brave unison:

Ex. 40. *Allegro maestoso*



There is a richness of harmony throughout this chorus which is unusual in Sullivan's music; certainly nothing in any of the previous operas would have led one to suppose the composer to be capable of so magnificent and so prolonged an outburst of triumphant energy. There are, perhaps, only two processional operatic scenes which can be said to compare with this for musical grandeur—one is in *Aïda* (where the long trumpets are so impressively used) and the other is in the last act of *Die Meistersinger*. If either of these may be thought to surpass the Chorus of Peers in majesty, it must be remembered that the resources of a grand opera orchestra are far greater than those of the comparatively small force with which Sullivan contrived to secure so imposing an effect.

At the conclusion of the chorus the Lord Chancellor himself enters. The pedantry of the Law (of which he claims to be the embodiment) is symbolized here by

a little instrumental *fugato* in the most learned style. Unfortunately in performance this is very seldom heard at all, for the part of the Lord Chancellor is generally played by a popular comedian who receives an ovation on his entrance which serves to drown Sullivan's sly touch of musical humour. This is a great pity, because the accompaniment of the succeeding solo (in which the "highly susceptible" Chancellor sings of the joys and inconveniences of his guardianship of wards in chancery) is derived in figuration from this contrapuntal prelude. This accompaniment, with its busy running bass, gives the song a very quaint character.

The setting of the next item, a Trio and chorus in barcarolle style, is also extremely successful, though in a less exceptional way, and the same may be said of Lord Tolloler's song in praise of Blue Blood, which has a very expressive melody. When the noble Lords discover that Phyllis, with whom they are all desperately in love, is betrothed to Strephon, they depart as they came, "dignified and stately," to the tune of Ex. 40, and the renewed blare of brass and drums, with the words

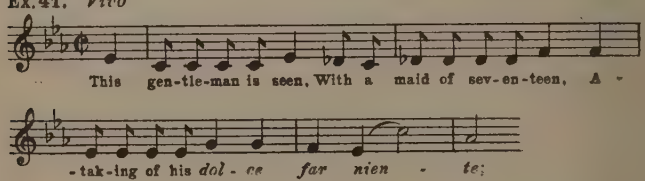
> "Tho' our hearts she's badly bruising
> In another suitor choosing,
> Let's pretend it's most amusing."

Sullivan's economy of method is well shown in the Lord Chancellor's second song, "Said I to myself—said I!" which, as an example of precise natty humour, would be difficult to excel. The voice part is in 6–8, against a crisp 2–4 accompaniment, as light as air, but

quivering with restless energy. Never, surely, was a mere patter-song more neatly fashioned than this.

After so many and varied excellencies it must be confessed that the long Finale to the act brings with it some disappointments. Constructively it is one of the weakest of all Sullivan's prolonged ensembles, for it fails to make a unified whole. This is not entirely the composer's fault. Gilbert has provided what is virtually a succession of separate humorous songs, with lyrics mostly in regular metres, and there is very little which serves to connect them one with another. Each set of verses is handled with facility, but they present a chain of unconnected melodies of most unequal merit, some of them hovering on the borderland of the commonplace. It is surprising, however, with what skill Sullivan contrives to dodge the pitfalls. As an example of this one may point to the weakest of all the melodies,

Ex. 41. *Vivo*



and put one's finger upon the last two bars, where, in extending the phrase to make a five-bar whole, the composer saves his tune from a banal conclusion.

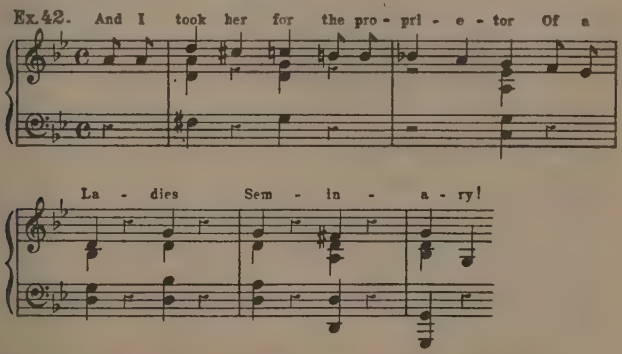
It seems, again, that the device of repeated notes (in both voices and accompaniment) is overdone to the point of triviality in the prolonged section beginning

"The lady of my love has caught me talking to another," but yet, in a similar manner, there are redeeming graces, such as the *pianissimo* treatment of the last verse, where the melodic figures previously heard only in the orchestra are transferred to the voice parts.

Sullivan knew that the words were everything here, and that, set to repeated notes, they would be certain to tell: he also knew that a chorus singing in a whisper is invariably more articulate than a chorus singing vigorously.

There are many unequivocal musical delights, however, to be found in this Finale, discursive though it be. Small points of felicitous illustration abound. As an instance of the composer's perfect grasp of details of character, nothing could better the humorous awe which he imparts to the Lord Chancellor's discovery of the Fairy Queen's identity:

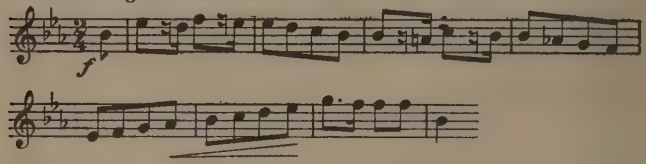
Ex. 42.



Nevertheless until the final pages come this is Gilbert's

Finale rather than Sullivan's. These final pages suddenly let loose a tremendously invigorating new tune which carries all before it, and brings down the curtain on a note of triumph which is certainly the composer's own:

Ex. 43. *Allegro marziale*

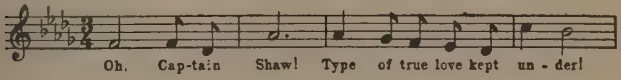


The Second Act—for which Palace Yard, Westminster, by moonlight, provides a most original stage setting—contains very much less music than the first and consists principally of brief and unpretentious numbers. But they are all attractive, and one is something more than this. The renowned song of the Sentry, with which the act opens, is too familiar to need quotation. Even though Nature no longer contrives that every little boy and gal who is born into the world alive should be either a little Liber*al* or else a little Conserva*tive*, we can relish the wit of the words and the precision of the music with the same zest that our fathers did. So also with Lord Mountararat's song in praise of the House of Lords which enshrines mock-dignity in a musical setting of real dignity, and has become, in a sense, a national tune, despite the pungent satire of the verses.

Even these classics of comic opera are deservedly eclipsed by the ditty of the Fairy Queen, "Oh, foolish

fay," with its ridiculous invocation of Captain Shaw, of the London Fire Brigade, who, whatever may have been his services to humanity, is destined to go down to posterity as the unwitting hero of one of the most intensely serious comic songs ever composed. The melody which embodies his name is a very beautiful one, judged by any standard. Have those of us who know it so well ever realized how perfectly this rising phrase is fashioned, and how vital is the throb of its inner rhythm?

Ex. 44. *Andante*



But a song like this defies analysis: the really amazing thing about it is that any composer with these lyrics of Gilbert in front of him could have translated their absurdities into an everlasting expression of loving wonder.

These three solos, together with a partially unaccompanied Quartet and a vivacious male-voice Trio, "Faint heart never won fair lady," are, perhaps, the outstanding popular successes of the act, but they by no means exhaust its attractions. In a totally different way the monologue of the sleepless Lord Chancellor is a splendid achievement. The recitative, restlessly punctuated by phrases derived from the *fugato* which accompanied his first entrance, is admirable, and the long breathless nightmare of a song which follows is a *tour-de-force* of vivid illustration. Here is musical non-

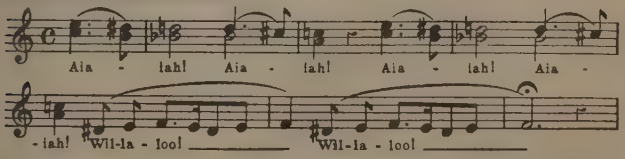
sense of a rather eerie kind. The chromatic instrumental texture should not escape notice, for it is woven into the song with consummate mastery, and the sudden change to the major key at the words "But the darkness has pass'd" is a moment of genuine inspiration. For sheer originality and resourcefulness this uncanny monologue compels unstinted recognition. The pity is that audiences so often call for an *encore* from the exhausted Chancellor. This demand should be rigorously resisted, for the effect of the song is entirely cumulative and a repetition is not only almost impossible physically, but it is, artistically, disastrous.

The part of the Lord Chancellor requires the talents of a very versatile artist for its adequate interpretation. Not only must he be able to compass the great difficulties of this nightmare song, but he must become the participant in a scene of almost tragic intensity. When Iolanthe pleads with him for her son (in a ballad which is one of the richest melodic treasures of the score) he declares his intention of making Phyllis his bride, and Iolanthe, disregarding the warnings of unseen fairy voices, reveals herself as his wife. Thus her vows are broken once again and the Fairy Queen enters to pronounce the final doom. All drolleries are suddenly set aside and the scene actually calls for the display of real human pathos.

The situation, which might so easily appear incongruous and out of tune with the rest of the work, is absolutely saved by the beauty and sincerity of Sullivan's

music. It is, strange to say, the only dramatic episode in any of the Savoy operas which is treated with convincing intensity, and were it not for its existence one might have doubted the capacity of the composer to rise to the heights demanded. In any case he never showed quite the same ability again. In *The Yeomen of the Guard*, where the opportunities were repeated, they failed to inspire him to anything more than a certain readiness to deal with dramatic situations in a conventional way. This scene alone, brief as it is, possesses an imaginative power which distinguishes the music of *Iolanthe* from that of its companions. Perhaps it was the fairy voices which appealed to Sullivan especially. He was half Irish, and there is certainly something suggestive of the Banshee in their piteous cry:

Ex. 45. *Andante moderato*

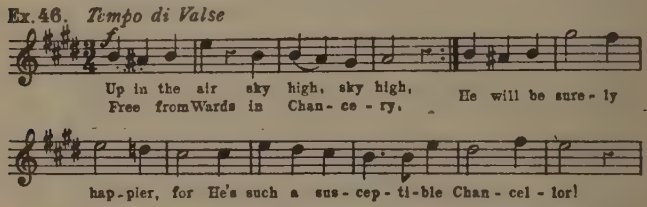


In a flash, of course, the serious mood is dispelled, and laughter restored. The fairies enter to declare that if Iolanthe must die so must they all, for they have succumbed to the charms of the noble lords and are all "fairy duchesses, marchionesses, countesses, viscountesses and baronesses." The Lord Chancellor is equal to the emergency—the fairy law must be amended by the insertion of a single word. "Every fairy shall die

who marries a mortal" must become "Every fairy shall die who *doesn't* marry a mortal." What could be simpler or more truly Gilbertian? And so, while Phyllis and Strephon are re-united, the Fairy Queen, to preserve her life, offers herself in marriage to the god-like Sentry, who gallantly consents "to save a female in distress."

There is no better way of clearing things up happily than by transporting the whole cast of mortals to fairy-land straight away. Thus, with newly-sprouted wings (each pair in accordance with the costume of the wearer) they all bid us a merry farewell, to the strains of the vivacious Trio which has already pleased us so greatly earlier in the act.

Ex. 46. *Tempo di Valse*


Up in the air sky high, sky high,
Free from Wards in Chan - ce - ry,
He will be sure - ly
hap - pier, for He's such a sus - cep - ti - ble Chan - cel - lor!

There is little cause for surprise that *Iolanthe* won a success equal to that of any of its predecessors, that it had a prosperous run to start with, and that it has remained one of the best loved of all the Savoy operas to this day. The exceptional quality of an almost ideal libretto had much to do with this, but it was Sullivan's art which gave it the attractive colouring without which Gilbert's satirical wit is apt, at times, to become a little hard and unsympathetic. The weak patches in the

Finale to Act I are almost the only blemishes on a score which exhibits the composer at the top of his gamut and finds him revelling in every opportunity for the play of fanciful imagination, whether tender, whimsical or boisterous—softening the sharp, irregular lines of ungainly lyrics into the graceful curves of pure English melody, or, as the occasion permits it, touching our hearts with that gentle sensitiveness of feeling which can only be expressed, in simple terms, by a mature artist.

The next Savoy opera, *Princess Ida, or Castle Adamant*, which was not required until *Iolanthe* had exhausted a long lease of popularity, was produced on January 5, 1884. It differed in several important respects from its companions. To begin with, the story was not "entirely new and original," to use the description which the management and the publishers applied to most of the works of the series. It was frankly called "A Respectful Operatic Perversion of Tennyson's 'Princess'," and even the names of the characters were borrowed from the late Laureate's famous poem. Then again the opera was planned in three sections instead of two. At first these sections were described, collectively, as a 'Prologue and Two Acts,' but shortly afterwards the Prologue was designated Act I, and the whole piece became known as a three-act opera. Yet one other essential point of difference calls for notice. Like the poem it avowedly 'perverted,' the libretto of *Princess Ida* was written in blank verse, with songs interspersed.

In earlier days such a work would perhaps have been known as a 'pleasant conceit.' It was a skit, of course, but on the whole quite a gentle one, and exhibited few of those unbridled extravagances which characterized the more topsy-turvy of Gilbert's creations. The dialogue, however, was embellished with an almost unreasonable number of puns. Punning was a form of humour much indulged in by English comic-opera librettists prior to Gilbert, but by the time that *Princess Ida* was produced the habit was almost out of fashion, surviving only in the pages of *Punch*, then edited by an inveterate punster of the old school.

As a matter of fact the bulk of the dialogue of the piece was actually written by Gilbert some fourteen years earlier, for a production which, under the title of *The Princess: A Whimsical Allegory*, saw the light at the Olympic Theatre in 1870. The music which was used for this play (it was not, of course, Sullivan's work) is completely forgotten: there were only about six musical numbers in all, and these were evidently of no special consequence. The piece must have been considerably altered and re-modelled before it was fitted for setting as an opera.

Princess Ida, as we know it, is one of the most intimate and individual, if not one of the strongest, of Sullivan's works, and if Gilbert is not, perhaps, in his most characteristic or exuberant frame of mind here, there is a quaint pretence of seriousness in the book which has its attractions, even when the blank verse does not move

very easily. The theme of the travesty, as in Tennyson, is feminine independence.

The satire seems peculiarly mild to-day, because women, in the normal course of development, have advanced far beyond a stage which it seemed ludicrous even to contemplate in 1884. Actually some of the jokes which were laughed at as exaggerations in the eighties are now mere understatements in which we can see no fun at all. The leading characters are, for the most part, too weakly drawn to create much interest. Ida herself is an exception. She contrives to cut a dignified figure as the head of a Women's University, whilst her girl graduates, pledged to abjure that tyrannic creature man, "nature's sole mistake," form an attractive chorus in their academic robes.

They are, however, not really at all advanced young ladies, judged by present standards. They do not even smoke, and they express no desire for the benefits of the franchise. They are merely blue-stockings with pretended grievances, giving very half-hearted support to the idealistic teachings of their principal. When it comes to fighting, the Princess is the only one who professes to show courage, and the behaviour of the fusiliers, the surgeon, the chemist and the bandmistress somehow seems contemptible rather than amusing after the record of women's endurance and heroism in the great war.

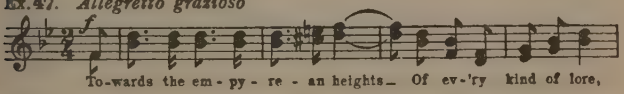
Apart from the failure of the libretto to survive as a satire (which could not be foreseen) the opera suffers a good deal from obvious constructive faults. The first

act is uneventful; the last act, despite a stage fight and two or three delightful musical settings, is a little dull. The second act contains some first-rate comedy, and the music here is almost continuously sprightly and in the real comedy vein. Yet the story is so devised that King Gama, the only strongly-drawn figure amongst the male *dramatis personae*, does not appear at all in this section of the piece. This is the more unfortunate since Sullivan shows, in the first and last acts, that Gama can inspire him to write in a whimsical style that affords a striking contrast to the somewhat subdued humour of the rest of the work. Musically speaking, *Princess Ida* is, on the whole, the most gentle of all the operas in the series. Perhaps the predominance of the feminine element had something to do with this. In any case even the orchestration is less brilliant than usual, and sparkles only rarely. It is effective, but in a quieter way. There is a certain subtlety of style in the instrumental writing, with a delicacy of contrapuntal texture in places, combined with a restraint which is almost akin to chamber music.

As an example of this one may point to the really beautiful chorus of girls which opens the second act, with its subdued and slightly 'academic' movement of the basses in the orchestra. The two-part vocal writing is very simple, but there are some details which save it from being in the least degree ordinary. The extension of the rhythm from four to six-bar phrases is extremely happy. And this is not all. No composer

was less afraid of the obvious than Sullivan, yet sometimes, as in this chorus, he makes a tiny change from what might be expected in the notes of a phrase which gives the music a touch of enchantment.

Ex. 47. *Allegretto grazioso*



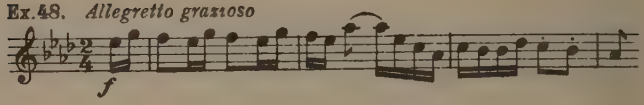
If this melody had been constructed entirely in the diatonic scale it would still have had its charm. But the use of the E natural and the C sharp in the second bar is an altogether bewitching stroke.

Again in that graceful duet for Melissa and Lady Blanche, "Sing hoity-toity! Sorry for some," the alternations between the keys of F major and A minor, with special insistence upon the 'added sixth' chord in each key, are similar examples of divergences which, without marring the simplicity of the music, effectually prevent even a suspicion of the commonplace.

These may seem merely technical points for the musician to note, but they have their value for any listener who chooses to listen discriminately.

Equally dainty and fastidious is the song for Lady Psyche about the Ape who loved a lady, where the music (curiously reminiscent of "The Magnet and the Churn" in *Patience*) is so much more pleasing than the words. Once more the high-born aristocratic tone clearly emerges, especially in the slick little instrumental interlude which occurs so many times, but never loses its freshness:

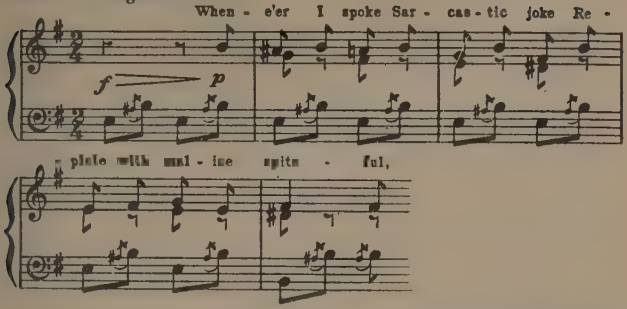
Ex. 48. *Allegretto grazioso*



Best of all, perhaps, in this sprightly vein, are Cyril's song with its seductive "kiss me" refrain, the nimble Trio for the three youths when they have donned the girls' cloaks ("I am a maiden cold and stately") and the bouncing, high-spirited Quintet, which all quickly dance their way into the hearts of the audience. These wonderfully vivacious pages are full of a refined light-heartedness which few other composers achieved so easily, and they can be listened to again and again with pleasure for the finish and detail of the part-writing in the accompaniments.

Against this level background, as it were, the strongly-marked musical characterization of the sinister King Gama, and his three burly hulking sons, stand out in bold relief. The opera might have been a little too uniform in style without the splashes of contrast which these personages afford the musician. Gama's two solos, especially the one in the last act, with the oft-quoted lines, "And don't the days seem lank and long When all goes right and nothing goes wrong," are capitally set. The music suggests the ugliness of the character without ever being ugly in itself. Could anything present a more skilful picture of irritability than this waspish opening phrase, with its fussy, lightly-scored accompaniment?

Ex. 49. *Allegretto vivace*

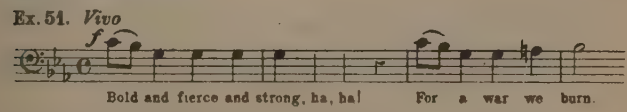


And what splendidly burly musical fun is forthcoming with the somewhat spectacular entry of the fearsome-looking warriors in their heavy suits of armour, which is the most striking feature of Act I! The almost grotesque lumbering march of those unison crotchets in 3–2 time as the three ponderous fellows stalk down the stage, their disjointed vocal phrases, punctuated first with a bubbling rhythm on the horns, like ironic

Ex. 50. *Allegretto moderato*

laughter—and afterwards with scampering triplets on the wood-wind—all these things are inimitably sketched in by the composer, and lead to the spirited and war-like final tune which is ultimately taken up by the full chorus, with rousing effect:

Ex. 51. *Vivo*

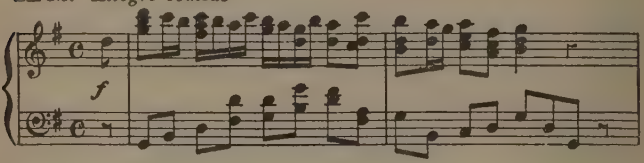


It is all very theatrical, no doubt, but at least it is meant to be that. There is nothing of its kind in any of the other operas, and it stands out the more glaringly in a work which is, for the most part, purely lyrical in style.

By the time we reach the last act, however, these three ugly brothers, for some reason which it is difficult to divine, seem to have lost their blustering manners and become quite ingratiating. They are strange warriors, anyhow, for they wear their armour all through the opera until they are required to fight, and then they strip it off piece by piece. It is while they are divesting themselves of these heavy encumbrances that, with Arac as chief spokesman, they sing one of the most genial and princely melodies that Sullivan ever composed—none the less attractive because it happens to be a distinctly Handelian tune, harmonized exactly in Handel's own particular manner.

Dramatically this change of mood seems quite indefensible, though we are grateful for such an excellent piece of oratorio music, and the words are splendid fun. One recurring cadence alone will be sufficient evidence of its character and quality:

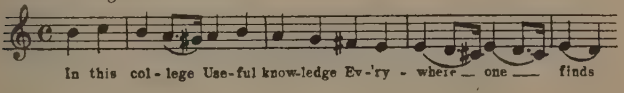
Ex. 52. *Allegro comodo*



Whilst acknowledging the aptitude of these numerous

good things one is bound, though it may seem ungracious, to complain of the weakness of certain pages of the score. Some of the music allotted to King Hildebrand is lacking in character. He is, at best, but a conventional lay-figure, dramatically and musically. Lady Blanche's solo, "Come mighty Must!" (the words are certainly not inspiring) is one of Sullivan's most conspicuous failures, for it is entirely dull, and one number in the second act even contains such an appalling setting of words as the following:

Ex. 53. *Allegro con moto*



surely one of the worst indiscretions to be found amongst the works of a composer generally so successful in finding a fitting counterpart for each verbal phrase. The words sound like a bad translation, and the tune was probably a 'ready-made' one, culled from the pages of *Thespis* or some discarded early work, and forced against its will into fresh action.

Sullivan's biggest chance in this opera for a display of constructive skill occurs in the extended Finale of Act II, which, in its way, constitutes one of his most successful sustained efforts. The exultant joy of the girls at the rescue of the Princess is admirably depicted: so, also, is Ida's scornful sentence on the three youths who have invaded the castle in disguise. Hilarion's appeal is on conventional lines, but effective enough

vocally, and with the arrival of the male chorus we get one of those spirited ensembles on broad lines in which, as we have seen previously, Sullivan was particularly happy—the men singing quickly and angrily against the wailing of the maidens at the calamity which has befallen them. The scornful peppery song of King Hildebrand, with its bustling accompaniment, is much the best thing allotted to this character, and is, indeed, extremely well done. Even better are the stolid disjointed phrases of Gama's three sons, which succeed it. The final section is on old-fashioned operatic lines, but it presses forward to an admirable climax in quick 3–4 time, in which the note of defiance is sustained energetically until the curtain falls.

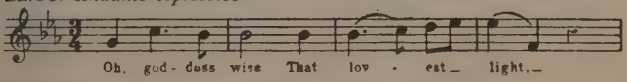
In the main, however, the music of *Princess Ida* is lyrical rather than forcible, and next to the captivating sprightliness of that chain of vivacious songs and ensemble pieces in the second act, which have already been praised, the best impression is made by the unpretentious grace of such a number as the chorus, "Expressive glances" (which adorns the Finale of Act I, and is utilized again to end the opera in the courtly mood with which it started) and, more especially, by the spacious tunefulness of Princess Ida's two solos. A final tribute of admiration should, indeed, be offered to the beauty of the first of these outstanding examples of vocal writing, "Oh, Goddess wise."

This song is genuinely impressive in its simple exaltation, but it is not cast in too commanding a tone

to balance satisfactorily with the lighter comedy of the surroundings. For once the composer is called upon to concentrate upon words of real poetic quality, and he responds with music which reaches a pitch of idealism which is rarely to be found in English musical art.

Beginning with this richly expressive phrase,

Ex. 54. *Andante espressivo*



the long-drawn melody slowly grows in interest until it reaches a climax of impressive sincerity at the words,

> "Let fervent thoughts be mine,
> That I may lead them to thy sacred shrine."

It is an inspired song, which assuredly entitles Sullivan to a place of honour amongst the most considerable melodists of the last fifty years.

Princess Ida was not at first regarded as one of the chief successes of the partnership. It ran for nine months only. After its first production the opera lay dormant, as far as professional representation was concerned, for thirty-eight years. It was, however, revived in 1922, during the D'Oyly Carte season at the Prince's Theatre, when its merits were recognized as they had not been before, by the general public as well as by musicians, and it is now accounted one of the happiest presentations in the regular repertory of the present company.

And this in spite of its dependence upon an outworn satirical theme which has, for the present generation, entirely lost its trenchancy.

CHAPTER VI

THE SAVOY OPERAS—II

"THE MIKADO" AND "RUDDIGORE"

It would be difficult for anyone but the dullest literary bookworm or the stodgiest musical pedant to write without enthusiasm of the next opera of the series, *The Mikado, or The Town of Titipu*, which was first presented to a public which had been waiting for it with unprecedented eagerness on March 14, 1885. The date may be regarded as a red-letter one in the annals of English dramatic and musical art. It was obvious from the very first that this was a work of historical importance and that in it the two partners revealed a maturity of execution which they had not previously so completely demonstrated.

Iolanthe might have been more fanciful and its humour based on a more poetic foundation ; *Princess Ida* might make a stronger appeal to educated musicians by reason of its greater intimacy of style and fastidiousness ; but *The Mikado* was incomparably more brilliant than either, and showed a continuous vivacity of movement which all the world could recognize and enjoy.

It was, indeed, not long before a very large portion

of the world was engaged in that recognition and enjoyment. Not only was the work hailed with delight in the United States, but the libretto was translated into other languages, and in Germany, particularly, *The Mikado* won as ready an acceptance as in the country of its birth. A musical conquest in Germany always gives a special *cachet* to an English composer. In Sullivan's case this was no mere complimentary success, but an immediate and permanent victory. The Germans freely admitted that *The Mikado* surpassed all their own classic examples of operetta or 'Singspiel.' They did not hesitate to accept it as a great comic-opera, and they produced it in all their leading musical centres, sometimes on a scale unknown in this country except in grand opera. It was directed by their most famous conductors, including Arthur Nikisch, and regarded as a work of genius by their principal professional musicians. These happenings are the more significant when we remember that Sullivan's colleagues at home were deploring what they regarded as the shocking levity of his methods, and shaking their heads over the circumstance that one of their number should descend to the debasing occupation of writing music which others less learned than themselves could listen to with pleasure. That German musicians of forty years ago should have shown a prompter discernment than our own prominent professors is, no doubt, a saddening reflection for us to-day, but we may find consolation in the fact that there was, at least, a large proportion of our own populace,

outside this narrow circle, which was ready to welcome a native achievement.

If a man's masterpiece is the work which appeals to the largest number of people of all nationalities and shades of thought, then it must be said that *The Mikado* was Sullivan's *chef d'œuvre*.

As with most of the other operas a topical event was the starting-point from which the author and composer set forth upon their humorous excursion. Even a few years earlier, in *Patience*, we can note that an interest in Japanese art was affected amongst the æsthetics of that period. By the time that *The Mikado* came into being this interest had extended to the general public, chiefly through the opening of a show Japanese village, in Knightsbridge, which was peopled by real native artificers, jugglers, tea-girls, etc., and excited very great curiosity amongst London sight-seers, who were fascinated by the costumes and quaint deportment of the little people from the Eastern seas.

Enormous pains were taken to make the stage-setting of the new opera as like the real thing as possible, and Gilbert, in rehearsing the piece, obtained the assistance of Japanese artists and performers, who coached the company in walking, dancing and manipulating their fans.

Except in the staging, however, there was very little in the way of local colour to be found in *The Mikado*. The author's gibes were directed more towards the English than the Japanese, and the composer, though he

toyed prettily enough with the 'pentatonic' scale[1] in a few places, did not bother himself to go very deeply into the matter. The opera is, in all essentials, a typically English affair, and even the names chosen for the characters are mostly made up, amusingly, of English words which have a Japanese sound. We have Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner, a ridiculous upstart who is betrothed to his ward, Yum-Yum: we have the immortal Pooh-Bah (born sneering) who is Lord High Everything-Else, and the arch-type of all multiple place-holders. Then there is Pish-Tush, a noble Lord, and Nanki-Poo, the Crown Prince of Japan, who appears disguised as a second-trombone player, endeavouring to escape from the clutches of Katisha, an elderly lady of his father's court who is in love with him. These, together with Yum-Yum's two sisters, Pitti-Sing and Peep-Bo, and the great Mikado himself (a terrifying despot with a craze for devising the most horrible punishments for his subjects) complete a compact little cast of distinctly comic types.

The story woven around them need not concern us greatly. It does not aim at being particularly dramatic, except in one episode, where the ugly Katisha is made to exhibit some malignity of a theatrical kind. It certainly makes no pretensions to coherence or con-

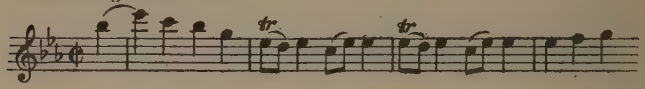
[1] A scale of six notes, upon which the music of Japan and other Eastern countries is mainly based. The black notes of the piano keyboard, from F sharp to F sharp, give an adequate idea of this scale.

sistency, but it deals with the idiosyncrasies of the various personages employed in it in a most delightful way, and in none of the operas are these characteristics seized upon more quaintly for illustration by the composer.

There is a kind of glitter in the music of *The Mikado* which gives it a specially bright colouring of its own. We feel this at once in the overture, although this is by no means one of the best examples of Sullivan's constructive skill. After a mildly barbaric beginning (based upon the Mikado's entrance) and a charming orchestral version of Yum-Yum's song in Act II, we launch into the impudent humours of the tune which is sung by Ko-Ko and Katisha at the end of the piece.

Here the pert little fragment

Ex. 55. *Allegro con brio*



is tossed about and teased by the composer in almost too insistent a manner; it is not developed, but simply repeated in various keys till it begins to outstay its welcome. Nevertheless we feel the peculiar fascination and sparkle of the composer's idiom in this irresponsible playfulness, and there is some compensation in the better constructed brilliance of the ending, in which the barbaric theme of the opening and the big tune from the end of Act I (Ex. 66) are both effectively brought into play.

When the curtain rises, during a little prelude remarkable for swirling passages (in widely-spread

unisons) on the wood-wind, we see a group of Japanese nobles in attitudes suggested by the pictures which are familiar to us

> "On many a vase and jar—
> On many a screen and fan."

The music is stiff and angular to match the movements of the singers, and one may observe that the opening vocal phrases are confined to the notes of the 'pentatonic' scale. The accompaniment is precise but busy. A very notable effect is gained in the second verse by switching over suddenly from the key of G to the key of C, and the final section, with its detached chords for the voices and sharp incisive orchestration, is extraordinarily effective. A return to the swirling wind passages is suddenly arrested by the appearance of Nanki-Poo, who comes in haste to inquire, in recitative, "where a gentle maid dwelleth named Yum-Yum." Pish-Tush asks him solemnly who he is, and he replies in an extended solo "A wand'ring minstrel I," which is one of the chief early successes of the opera. Beginning in serenade style, Nanki-Poo describes his "ballads songs and snatches," first giving a sample of a sentimental love-song, with sighing roulades. Then, to the sound of trumpets, he sings a very English patriotic ditty, following it up with an even more typically English "song of the sea," with a "yeo-ho, heave-ho" chorus, which is irresistibly comic when sung to traditional nautical actions by the stiff Japanese figures. Just as his hearers are getting thoroughly roused up the music

suddenly relapses into the serenade mood, and ends as it began,

"A wand'ring minstrel I,
A thing of shreds and patches,
Of ballads songs and snatches
And dreamy lullaby,"

and the noble gentlemen, as if ashamed of their unwonted exertions, resume their stiff pensive attitudes. The whole of this scene is set by Sullivan with wonderful facility and skill, and not a single humorous point which music could intensify is missed. The sailor song is particularly breezy, the chorus singing their parts in the jovial refrain to a surging accompaniment which is almost realistic.

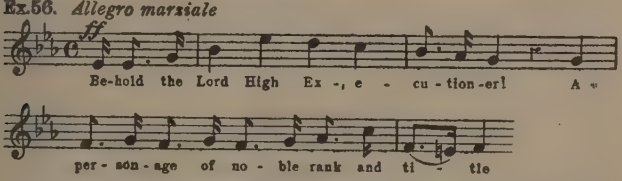
Pish-Tush's musical narrative (an explanation of the strange circumstances in which Ko-Ko has been promoted to his high position) follows, and this, an extremely good song in itself, is specially noteworthy for the brilliance of the orchestral setting (alluded to on page 225).

Picturesque orchestration also greatly enlivens the next song, sung by Pooh-Bah with the assistance of Nanki-Poo and Pish-Tush. Sullivan's quiet rhythmical use of wind and side-drum here is well worthy of study.[1] He has to describe how, at Ko-Ko's wedding, "the brass will crash and the trumpets bray," which he does by gentle suggestion, without disturbing the pulsation of the song or drowning the voice-part.

[1] See Ex. 103, page 225.

Brass and drums, however, are unrestrained for the entry of the Lord High Executioner, who arrives to the sound of pompous fanfares and another thoroughly western tune, more suggestive, perhaps, of the "Fine Old English Gentleman" than the miserable whipper-snapper it is intended to extol. And herein, no doubt, lies some of its satirical sting.

Ex.56. *Allegro marziale*

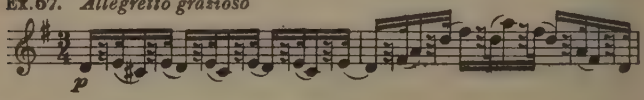


Ko-Ko's first little solo, "Taken from the county jail," reveals another touch of mastery in the orchestration of a very simple accompaniment (see Ex. 105, page 227), and the number ends with a resumption of the martial strains which greeted his appearance. The choral writing throughout this, though elementary, is remarkably telling, not only in the mocking homage of the *forte* passages, but also in the soft repetitions of Ko-Ko's words which serve to mark the rhythm of the solo section. Sullivan was never more thoroughly at home than when he was exploiting the varieties in colour of which a male-voice chorus is capable.

We may pass over Ko-Ko's famous solo about the people who "never would be missed." In a musical sense there is little to be made of a mere comic song of this kind, and Sullivan shows his wisdom by allowing

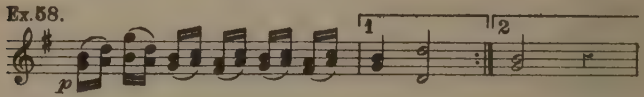
the words to be unfettered by any definitely illustrative setting. He concentrates upon the opportunity for a complete change of mood which is offered him at the entrance of the Japanese maidens. Up to this point male characters have had it all their own way: now we hear the brighter treble tones of the bashful schoolgirls, all "eighteen and under," who, shy and wondering, enter to music which is, in itself, both wondering and shy. Here is the rhythm:

Ex. 57. *Allegretto grazioso*



and here the opening melody:

Ex. 58.



Gilbert never wrote more pretty verses:

"Comes a train of little ladies
From scholastic trammels free,
Each a little bit afraid is,
Wond'ring what the world can be!

"Is it but a world of trouble—
Sadness set to song?
Is its beauty but a bubble,
Bound to break ere long?"

Assuredly Sullivan never supplied more delicately pretty music. Let us observe how the rhythm of Ex. 57 is continued in every bar of the music, and how

charmingly the smooth answering phrases of sopranos and altos, at the words

"Are its palaces and pleasures
Fantasies that fade?"

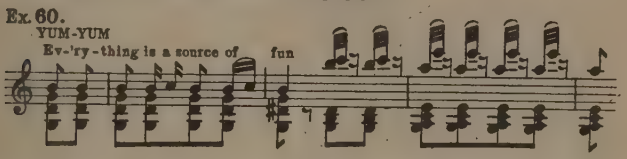
contrast with the timid fluttering of the opening two-part tune.

One little masterpiece of delicacy is no sooner over than it is followed by another, less sedate but far more playful, as Yum-Yum, Pitti-Sing and Peep-Bo ("three little maids from school") shimmer gracefully down the stage together.

Ex. 59. *Allegretto grazioso*

It is possible for music to be wreathed in smiles, and Sullivan was a master of it in that mood, but if ever music contrived positively to titter it was here. Once or twice it is even heard to giggle:

Ex. 60.



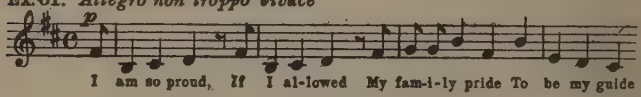
And could anything show more witchery than the use of the silent bar, just before the end of two of the verses? Was Sullivan afraid that it could never be silent enough when, on the occasion of rehearsing one of the revivals, he broke this silence by pencilling a little curling phrase

into the bassoon player's part? This stroke is amongst the most delicious of after-thoughts, but is not in the original score. One would gladly hear the passage both ways, on different occasions.

The cheery Quintet, memorable for the episode in which Pooh-Bah sings his stolid tra-la-las against the smooth swinging melody of the upper voices, is also a clever number, but not quite so charmingly graceful as the last two. Nor is the ensuing soprano and tenor duet amongst the best items of a score which is in the main so good that it is impossible to preserve the high quality at first established quite without a break.

On the other hand in the male-voice trio, for Ko-Ko, Pish-Tush and Pooh-Bah, we have the composer in his most richly inventive mood. Each of the participants sings his own bit of melody, beginning with Pooh-Bah (who certainly has the best tune)

Ex. 61. *Allegro non troppo vivace*

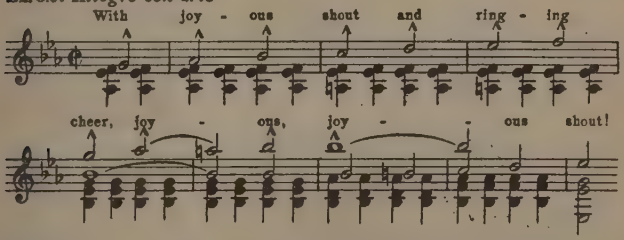


and afterwards the three melodies are blended together, and rounded off with a snappy piece of tongue-twisting alliteration about "a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block." The rhythmic precision of this amusing *coda*, enforced as it is by graphic orchestration, makes it one of the most telling strokes of musical wit which the opera affords.

The Finale to Act I, though not always convincing

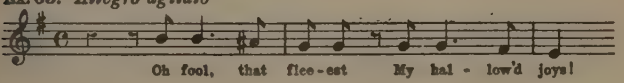
dramatically, is, from the musical standpoint, a considerable achievement. The steady march of the populace who assemble to hear from Ko-Ko the name of his victim, has the right note of expectancy. When it is disclosed that Yum-Yum is to be surrendered to Nanki-Poo on condition that he will allow himself to be executed at the end of a month, a big joyous ensemble is built up, interrupted by Pooh-Bah's unctuous recitative (with its florid conclusion, "Long life to you—till then,") but culminating in a grandiose repetition of a fine passage in which the sopranos climb up the scale to a top B flat:

Ex. 62. *Allegro con brio*



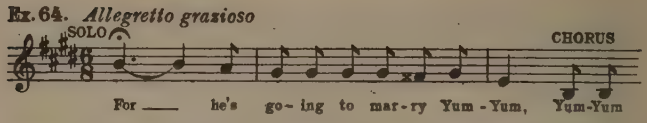
Katisha's sudden appearance presents a vivid stage picture, and the music here is suitably theatrical, if in a rather conventional way. Her song, however, has a striking initial phrase, and is an extremely well-devised example of sustained agitation:

Ex. 63. *Allegro agitato*



Pitti-Sing's interruption, with its cheeky, taunting refrain:

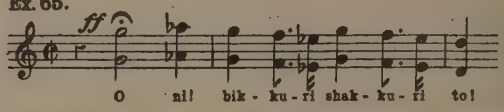
Ex. 64. *Allegretto grazioso*



brings us back, with a bump, from the melodramatic to the comic, and the change is welcome. So far so good. But unfortunately we have not quite finished with Katisha. She has to attempt the disclosure of Nanki-Poo's identity, and this is never a very comprehensible scene. In one revival of the opera Nanki-Poo produced his trombone, and succeeded in drowning Katisha's voice by blowing fierce blasts which were not in the score! The experiment has never been repeated, but it undoubtedly helped a very unconvincing situation, for one is always at a loss to know why the *crowd* should be so anxious not to hear the disclosure. It is not the way with crowds.

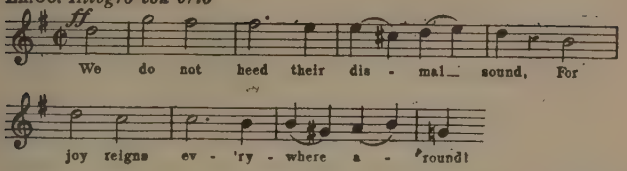
Nevertheless it cannot be denied that Sullivan, hampered though he was with such material, served the librettist with extraordinary efficiency. Katisha's disjointed phrases are broken into by the most uncanny cries, to Japanese (?) words,

Ex. 65.



until she finally gives up the struggle, and the act ends with an exultant ensemble of remarkable strength, crowned with a splendid broad tune which sweeps all before it:

Ex. 66. *Allegro con brio*



The picture at the fall of the curtain—the baffled Katisha crying for vengeance from the steps at the back of the stage—is an imposing one, and the music is thoroughly in keeping. Yet one feels that both librettist and composer have expended too much powder and shot upon a scene which is wholly incomprehensible—that the heavy-handed grand-opera flourishings imported here do not quite ring true, and tend to destroy the unity and consistency of what is, after all, a light musical satire and not a drama of conflict.

There is nothing in the second act against which such a criticism as this could be levelled. It is all pure joy. Moreover there is no diminution of technical resource, as we find in the second half of one or two of the other operas. The opening chorus of girls, as Yum-Yum is being painted and decorated for her wedding, is a lyrical effusion of the most delicate description, orchestrated in a masterly fashion. The piano score gives not even a hint of what really happens in the accompaniment. Still more fragrant is Yum-Yum's little solo ; Gilbert has provided delightful lyrics in a mood of the most innocent egoism, and Sullivan's music is a little miracle of apt word-setting, with a shapely

melody which is greatly enhanced, once more, by graceful orchestral commentaries (see Ex. 102, page 223).

In connection with this song it is interesting to find that Dr. Percy Buck (King Edward Professor of Music at London University) in his book *The Scope of Music* [1] has some pertinent allusions to the unique skill which the composer has exhibited. "The writing of a learned eight-part fugue," he tells us, "is within the power of any musician who cares to waste his time in learning how to do it; but if he tries to reset the words 'The sun whose rays are all ablaze,' and then compares his music with Sullivan's, he will have no doubts as to which is the more serious task." An English University professor who is ready to acknowledge the artistry displayed in *The Mikado*, as handsomely as this, is such a rarity that the circumstance seems worthy of special notice here.

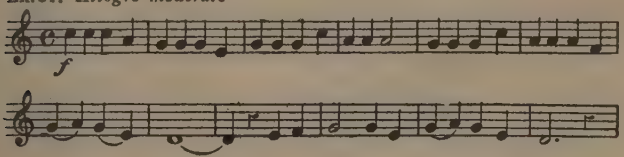
In the so-called Madrigal for four voices (partly accompanied, which no real madrigal ever is) we have, perhaps, the most wholly pleasant specimen of vocal ensemble writing which can be found in any of Sullivan's works. It may be remembered that even his strongest opponent characterized it as "in its trifling way" the work of a "delicate-handed artist." One can readily accept both descriptions. It is a trifle, certainly, and does not attempt to be anything else, but it is wrought with the same degree of finish that we find in a Ballet by Morley, whose style it faintly recalls, especially

[1] *The Scope of Music* Percy C. Buck (Oxford University Press).

in the cheery imitative 'fa-la-las' at the end of each verse. The little patches of orchestration are devised to help the singers. One can recall many occasions, however, when they have only served to show up bad intonation!

After a merry little Trio ("Here's a how-de-do"), with a humorous *parlando* finish, we come to the one real Japanese tune, imported into the score to give local colour and add 'artistic verisimilitude' to the entrance of the Mikado. How or where Sullivan picked it up we do not know. It has the merit of sounding just like what a European would imagine a Japanese tune to be. Actually it turned out to be an unfortunate choice, for Sullivan was afterwards rather severely rebuked by a shocked native, who disapproved of the use, for such an exalted purpose, of what he declared was "the foulest song ever sung in the lowest tea-house of Japan." However, it was the music alone which was 'translated,' and the tune, as it stands in the opera, shows no traces of its low origin, but strikes one as being rather complacently pompous.

Ex.67. *Allegro moderato*



The Mikado's first utterances (with Katisha's interruptions) are set with a certain stiff simplicity—he is a particularly starchy and unbending monarch—but the famous solo in which he devises a number of original

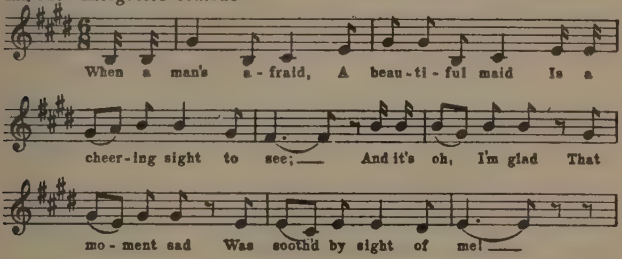
punishments intended 'to fit the crime' is a markedly humorous effusion, in which Sullivan indulges in an exceptional variety of realistic touches in the orchestra (see pages 229–30). One point about the chorus of this song is very striking. It is in A major and after modulating to E it suddenly plunges, by means of one chord, into D major. A modulation to the sub-dominant key in a tune of this kind is as unusual as a modulation to the dominant is common, for the reason that in the first case it is seldom easy to return to the original tonality in a convincing way. This seemed to give Sullivan no trouble at all, for though the new key is firmly established we feel that the tune ends quite naturally and satisfactorily on a definite tonic A. Composers with a turn for experiment might try their hand at doing the same thing. As in the case of Dr. Buck's suggested test, they will probably find it far more difficult to negotiate than they imagine.

The Trio, in which Pitti-Sing, Ko-Ko and Pooh-Bah attempt to appease the Mikado with details of the supposed execution—related from three separate points of view—is a treasure of humour. The lyrics are first-class, and they are set to one of those marvellously supple tunes which seem adequate to express every turn of Gilbert's changing fancy equally well. It is curious how often Sullivan chose the alternating keys of E minor and E major for narrative songs. It would certainly be impossible to imagine this one in any other tonality.

If there is one point that gives more pleasure than

anything else in the song it is the extreme self-satisfaction expressed in the major section, when Pitti-Sing relates her share in the proceedings:

Ex. 68. *Allegretto comodo*



The mixture of shameless egotism and bland innocence here is surely inimitably expressed! The gay little Quintet "A is happy—B is not" (curiously described in the score as a 'Glee'), and the familiar lilting humours of "The Flowers that bloom in the spring," are in quite a different vein, but equally perfect. They are both infectious instances of the laughter which enlivens Sullivan's music to this opera.

Perhaps, after these merry moments, the listener is hardly in tune for the sudden seriousness of Katisha's song, "Hearts do not break." It is not quite on a level with the best of its kind, but the intrusion is brief, and the scene of Ko-Ko's outrageous wooing, which ensues, provides us with a final touch of musical humour which, despite the absurdity of Gilbert's text, sounds an unexpectedly plaintive note. Unfortunately this note is seldom pitched aright. Ko-Ko's "Tit-willow"

is, probably, of all Sullivan's songs the least understood and the most frequently abused. It needs to be sung with an air of absolute sincerity. The modern plan of clowning it, indulging in falsetto 'tit-willows,' etc., is ruinous. As a deliberately funny song it is a failure, but given simply, with no affectations or exaggerations of voice or manner, it is a supreme success. It can make the whole of this wildly impossible scene convincing in an unexpected way. One may believe that it was in this quietly pathetic mood that the absurd little tragedy of the tom-tit was sung by George Grossmith (the original Ko-Ko) and probably no other comedian seen in the part has had command of the same power of appeal at this difficult moment. Unless Ko-Ko, shameless upstart though he be, is shown to be possessed of an aptitude for simulating refinement and sensitive feeling in order to conquer Katisha, the ending of *The Mikado* inevitably falls rather flat, however much one may have enjoyed the lively humours of the rest of it.

The duet which follows (in which, by the way, it is almost incredibly difficult to sing the words clearly in the proper rhythm and at the proper pace) marks a return to broader methods of merry-making. It has a jolly rollicking tune, a portion of which is quoted early in this chapter in discussing the overture (see Ex. 55). After this the events of the opera quickly press on to a finish, and the brief Finale, having nothing new to tell us, brings down the curtain on some welcome recollections from the first act.

The Mikado, as might be surmised, had a triumphant career at the Savoy. Six hundred and seventy-two performances were registered before it was withdrawn—an unbroken spell of prosperity which was not equalled in the case of any of Sullivan's other operas. It has been revived constantly and never failed in its appeal. Whether the widespread success of the work has had a favourable influence on the progress of English music, or any influence at all, is a matter upon which expert opinions seem to differ.

Sir Henry Hadow, in one of his excellent historical surveys of music, has declared that although Sullivan has "enriched the gaiety of nations," yet "in the general advance a writer of comic-opera, however successful, can be little more than a skirmisher." Well, *The Mikado*, at all events, has been skirmishing to some purpose all over the globe for over forty years, and is likely to be still skirmishing when most of the works which have contributed to "the general advance" have been interred and forgotten. Perhaps it is, after all, not a bad thing to 'skirmish' so efficiently as this.

Of course there is always, in artistic as well as in physical life, a possibility of the survival of the unfit, and many serious-minded people may regret the continued success of a work which sets out to depict life in such a wholly frivolous manner. For good or ill, however, *The Mikado* holds a place throughout the wider musical world amongst the unassailable classics, and is regarded abroad, without question, as England's supreme achievement in the sphere of opera.

To provide a work to follow *The Mikado* which should not disappoint expectations was, perhaps, a superhuman task. It was inevitable that *Ruddigore, or The Witch's Curse*, with its rather nasty name, its less brilliantly written libretto, and its less immediately attractive music, should suffer by comparison with its predecessor. The first performance took place on January 22, 1887, and though many must have enjoyed the wit of the piece and admired the music, a large section of the public and the press did not hesitate to record their disappointment in emphatic terms.

There was, to begin with, such an outcry against the title (which was nastier still as it was originally spelt, with a *y* instead of an *i* in the middle) that Gilbert was within an ace of changing it to *Kensington Gore, or Robin and Richard were Two Pretty Men*, which, if not so ugly, would have been a very poor substitute.[1] But Sullivan objected, very wisely, and the original name, with the slight change of spelling, still stands.

In spite of the criticisms which were levelled against the work (and its sanguinary title) it had a fairly prosperous career. It brought paying audiences to the theatre for eight months, though numbers of people persisted in regarding it as the outstanding failure of the partnership up to this point, and it was not revived for thirty-four years.

The public of to-day, in a better position to judge of its merits, has taken the work to its heart in no uncertain fashion, though it is not now presented quite in

[1] Disclosed in a speech by Gilbert at the O.P. Club, December 30, 1906.

its original form. A new overture is used,[1] some of the weaker musical numbers are omitted or shortened, and it is played, probably, in an altogether broader style than its creators intended—to its loss in some respects and its gain in others.

Gilbert's libretto was intended to satirize the 'transpontine' type of melodrama which had formerly enjoyed a vogue in the West End, but was, by the time *Ruddigore* appeared, almost confined to the provinces and the London theatres south of the Thames. As a skit, therefore, it was a trifle belated, but the story was founded upon a genuinely humorous idea. A terrible curse had been cast by a witch upon all the successive Baronets of Ruddigore, which compelled them to commit one crime every day, or perish in agony.

This provocative main motive is, however, surrounded by a number of incidental whimsicalities which are a little strained and far-fetched. The rightful heir to the title, when the piece begins, is hiding himself in the Cornish fishing village of Rederring, disguised as a young farmer under the name of Robin Oakapple, whilst his younger brother, who believes him to be dead, has inherited the baronetcy, with its grim responsibilities.

We see Robin first as a bashful youth anxious to win the heart of Rose Maybud, a simple village maiden, whose conduct and manners are regulated by the

[1] Constructed by a very able composer who preserves his anonymity. It is a vast improvement, it must be confessed, upon the original overture, which was the poorest of the series.

instructions given in a book on etiquette. She is shadowed by an absurd chorus of ready-dressed professional bridesmaids, eager to assist at her wedding as soon as it can be arranged. We are introduced in turn to Robin's foster-brother Richard (a man-o'-war's man), to a crazy creature called Margaret (who nowadays dresses and behaves like Ophelia in the mad scene, and is very much out of the picture), and to Sir Despard Murgatroyd (the bad baronet *pro tem.*), whose daily villainies have driven away her reason.

Richard, after singing a nautical song, dancing a hornpipe (a decided accomplishment for a leading tenor), making love to Rose on Robin's behalf (and very nearly winning her for himself) discloses the real baronet's secret—and Robin is forthwith compelled to depart for Ruddigore Castle to take up the heritage he has shirked.

In the second act we see Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd (alias Robin Oakapple) endeavouring to devise some innocent evil which may be sufficient unto the day. But he is tormented by the pictures of his ancestors, who step from their frames in ghostly fashion and demand that he shall commit a real crime at once. In order to satisfy them he abducts a very old woman from Rederring, who turns out to be a former sweetheart of one of the ghosts. Ultimately, by a typical Gilbertian subterfuge, he contrives to end the spell, not only gaining freedom (and Rose Maybud) for himself, but re-uniting the susceptible ghost to its venerable lady-love of long ago.

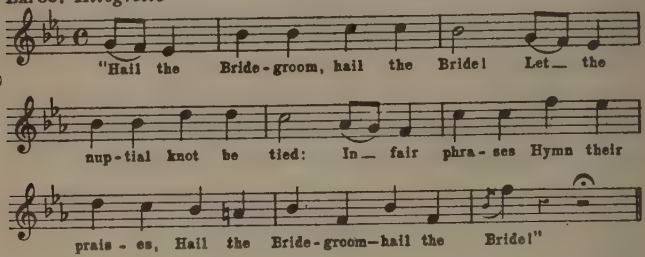
The fantastic and occasionally grisly humours of the play demand a variety of accomplishments from the composer. Sullivan made light of the difficulties and rose to the many opportunities for picturesque writing afforded in a score which he always regarded as one of his best efforts. *Ruddigore* is, perhaps, more than any of the series the 'musician's opera.' This is not to say that it is more full of contrapuntal devices and cleverness—few musicians (except hoary professors and writers of text-books) really care anything for such matters as these. On the contrary, taken as a whole, it is simpler in texture than most of them. But it refrains from indulging, to the same extent as its companions, in obvious ear-tickling lilts, and the tunes are not, for the most part, of the kind that can readily be hummed after a single hearing.

Over and over again in the course of the work we find imaginative touches of a somewhat subtle description—little twists of rhythm, tiny dabs of colour, which make an effect upon the connoisseur (who knows the value of these things) rather than upon the man in the street (who does not try to find out how anything is done).

Examples of such subtleties occur in the delightful Trio in the first act ("In sailing o'er life's ocean wide") where the rhythmic pulsation, with its alternations of four- and three-bar phrases, is peculiarly fresh and ingenious; in the recitative of Mad Margaret, which teems with capricious and tricky solo passages on the wood-wind; in the constantly recurring Bridesmaids'

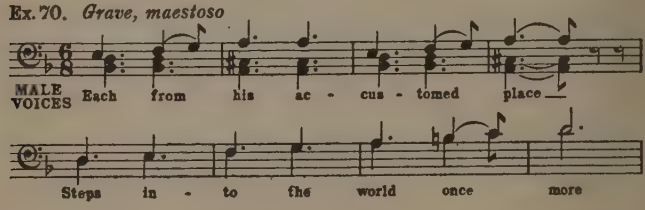
chorus, where the voices break loose, as it were, from the orchestral setting and end with a playful chirp on a note which is not part of the key chord:

Ex. 69. *Allegretto*


"Hail the Bride-groom, hail the Bride! Let— the
nup-tial knot be tied: In— fair phra-ses Hymn their
prais-es, Hail the Bride-groom—hail the Bride!"

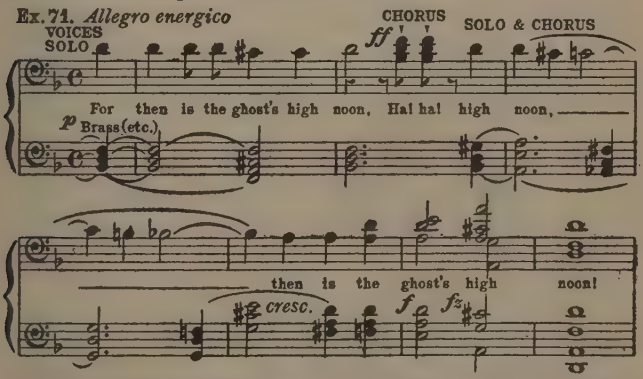
The appeal to the musician is even stronger in the weird opening scenes of the second act, where there are some experiments in free 'modal' melody-making, as well as some unaccustomed adventures in chromatic harmony. The chorus of the Murgatroyd ancestors, who have stepped out of the picture frames to reprimand the unfortunate baronet, is an impressive piece of work. Ridiculous as the situation may be, the composer is not in the mood for laughter-making. The awesome gravity of such a passage as the following, for instance, is of rare occurrence in Sullivan's music:

Ex. 70. *Grave, maestoso*



It should be pointed out that the use of the chord of G major as a basis for the fifth and sixth bars of the above extract greatly helps the composer to establish the 'other-world' feeling of the music.

As for the song of the ghost of Sir Roderic, "When the night wind howls in the chimney cowls," this must be acknowledged as a master-stroke of vividly picturesque writing, both vocally and orchestrally. It is difficult to quote from, but the bare outline of some of its most impressive progressions given below will show that the composer indulges in a freedom of style which proves that he was able to widen his harmonic outlook when the occasion inspired him to do so.

Ex. 71. *Allegro energico*

The eerie shimmering of the upper stringed instruments which continues throughout the song is not suggested in the above extract, nor can one reproduce, in a compressed sketch, the innumerable illustrative touches which Sullivan allots to the wood-wind. But

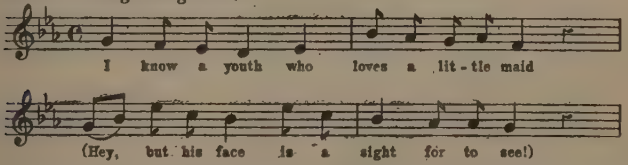
those who have heard the opera will not need to be reminded that the highly imaginative orchestration is a vital part of the composer's means of expression. It is a pity that this song is not given occasionally in the concert-hall where, with a larger orchestra, it would create an even stronger musical effect than in the theatre. As a piece of music it could hold its own in any surroundings, and take its place beside Elgar's Variations, Stanford's "Sea Songs," Parry's "Blest Pair of Sirens," or Holst's "Planets," as one of the few outstanding great works of latter-day English music.

In contrast with these stirring pages there are some weak, or at least undistinguished, numbers in *Ruddigore*, as well as many which are attractive, and even alluring, after the more normal 'Sullivanesque' manner.

In the former category may be placed Robin's two songs (the second is generally omitted nowadays), which are merely commonplace; Sir Despard's melodramatic solo in Act I, "Oh, why am I moody and sad" (with the snappy comments of the chorus); and the Finale of Act II, which is quite surprisingly vapid. The main theme of this is imported unmistakably (but probably unconsciously) from Japan, for it is but an altered version of the native tea-house tune in *The Mikado*, from which all the character has evaporated. The present D'Oyly Carte management is certainly wise in its policy of scrapping this feeble Finale altogether, and finishing the opera with a repetition of the dance which makes such a jolly wind-up to Act I.

In the latter category (the category of attractive numbers) it is a pleasant task to urge the claims of several things which deserve more than a passing notice. Quite early in the opera we have Dame Hannah's simple narrative of the witch's curse, and the artless little song for Rose Maybud with her book of etiquette—both slender in interest, perhaps, but artistic in a restrained way. The bashful duet for Rose and Robin has more substance in it, and is wholly charming in conception. It belongs to the same type as "Prithee, pretty maiden" in *Patience*, and is almost as good as its model.

Ex. 72. *Allegretto grazioso*

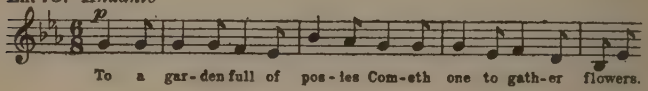


Richard Dauntless's solo—a sea-song after the manner of "The Golden Vanitee" and its like—strangely enough gave offence to some of our friends across the Channel, who were unable to see that the contempt it expressed for the 'miserable Parley-voo' was a mere caricature of the braggart sailor of by-gone times. It has rather a poor tune, but somehow it always goes with spirit, and the Hornpipe, which succeeds it, is quite what a Hornpipe ought to be, if nothing more.

Mad Margaret's recitative has already been mentioned: it is followed by a song, "To a garden full of posies," in which some very prettily-turned verses are

accorded a setting which has a kind of Mozartian innocence and charm:

Ex. 78. *Andante*



This placid melody is a strange pendant, perhaps, to the parodied ravings of the introduction, but its beauty comes as a welcome relief.

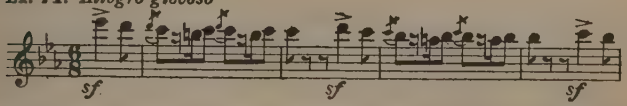
Sheer light-hearted exuberance is the keynote of the brief duet for Richard and Sir Despard, "To shirk the task were fiddle-de-dee." It is a deftly written piece, which dances along with a melody almost entirely confined to the notes of the pentatonic scale. Set off by the brightest and most fanciful scoring, this duet always proves one of the surest successes of the opera.

The Finale to Act I, which immediately follows, though it cannot be accounted uniformly effective throughout, begins and ends well. The Quartet (with chorus), "When the buds are blossoming," is a lovely piece of work in what one may call the Sullivan-Madrigalian style—more complex in technique than the example in *The Mikado*, more skilfully built up, too, and infinitely more tender in its expressiveness. The novel device of using the chorus in sections in conjunction with the quartet of solo voices—first the sopranos alone, and then the tenors alone—proves a highly effective feature of the ensemble writing. The vivacious final pages of the act take the form of a kind of Irish

"Hop-Jig," a measure in 9–8 time, more remarkable for its unfailing liveliness than for its suitability as a setting of the words which Gilbert has provided. It is prolonged, however, by the orchestra alone to serve for a dance, and as a dance it is tremendously invigorating.

The second act is not entirely ghostly, by any means. It has its share of musical gaiety and humour. The gaiety is well exemplified in the lively entrance of Rose and Richard with their irrepressible train of bridesmaids, to the lilting air

Ex. 74. *Allegro giocoso*



which one gladly hears again a little later in the piece.

The humour is reserved for the decorous pirouettings of Sir Despard and Margaret. The erstwhile bad baronet has reformed, and the former Ophelia is no longer wild and untidy, but her 'hair is combed,' her 'face is washed' and her 'boots fit.' They appear together, an ultra-sedate married couple, dressed, to quote the dramatist's description, "in sober black of formal cut." They have settled down to virtue and usefulness,

"In fact we rule
A National School,"

and they sing a duet which is the very pattern of prim angularity, with little interludes to accompany their 'blameless dances' and 'respectable capers.' Sullivan punctuates the oddities of this delightful episode with

evident relish. There is not a note too many nor a note misplaced.

Dame Hannah's solo about the pretty little flower and the great oak tree—a type of song to which the composer was always able to impart distinction—cannot be omitted from this appreciative survey, though it does not differ greatly from others of the same family. Some final words of praise, however, must be reserved for an achievement which, in its own way, is almost as great as the ghost song. This is the Trio for Margaret, Robin and Sir Despard, "My eyes are fully open to my awful situation," a miracle of a patter-song, unapproached and unapproachable in its kind.

It is quite useless to quote a bar or two as an illustration. The effect is entirely dependent upon the onward sweep of those breathless quavers which never cease from the moment they begin till the very last note of the third verse. The words are excellent, but even Gilbert, with Sullivan to set the pace, must have realized how many of them would be lost, for he makes Sir Despard sing:

> "This particularly rapid unintelligible patter
> Isn't generally heard, and if it is it doesn't matter."

Anyone who will take the trouble to look into this tune closely, or even to sing or play it through slowly, will discover that it is without a flaw of any kind—perfect in its shapeliness and sequence of ideas and without a single weak bar. But of course the speed is the thing that makes it effervesce. It is like a Mendelssohn *scherzo* set to voices.

One is apt to overlook the musical mastery that goes to the making of such a perfect example of frivolity as this, and as with other impish fragile things it can easily be destroyed by clumsy or careless handling.

Against the mere gabbling energy with which it is usually presented it is probably useless to protest. But here at least is a case which cries out for some drastic revision of the so-called traditions of performance, particularly when it comes to the buffoonery that is thought essential when responding to an encore.

Ruddigore may not be the most consistent or the most continuously effective of the Savoy operas, and it is never likely to be amongst the most popular. Nevertheless it can boast of qualities of imagination to which none of the others, save perhaps *Iolanthe*, can lay equal claim. G. K. Chesterton has declared that the satire of Gilbert is, by itself, "too intelligent to be intelligible." This paradoxical statement seems especially applicable to the text of *Ruddigore*. Sullivan had a severe task before him when he undertook to set this libretto, with its crude contrasts, its unbelievable motives, and its somewhat harsh character-drawing. He succeeded, as he always did, by the persuasion of his melodies and by the gentle elusive humour which softened everything it touched. When Gilbert was merely crafty Sullivan was sincere. When Gilbert had his tongue in his cheek Sullivan wore his heart on his sleeve. It was the only possible way.

CHAPTER VII

THE SAVOY OPERAS—III

"THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD" AND "THE GONDOLIERS"

In *The Yeomen of the Guard, or The Merryman and his Maid*, originally produced at the Savoy Theatre on October 3, 1888 (after a number of successful revivals of the earlier operas) Gilbert provided Sullivan with a libretto which was in a totally different vein from any of its predecessors. Instead of being concerned with a series of ridiculous and inconsequential situations to be cleared up precipitately at the end by some trifling quibble, this was an opera-book with a really good plot of romantic interest. The main motive of the story, plausible if improbable, was a coherent and highly dramatic one, to which the scene chosen, the grim old Tower of London, provided a sombre background. The characters had far more semblance to real human beings than those diverting caricatures to which Gilbert's admirers had grown accustomed. Their motives were clear and their actions more or less reasonable. They were picturesquely dressed in costumes of the Tudor period, and (when they did not forget to do so) they spoke in the English of Shakespeare's day. The main

happenings of the opera may be briefly outlined. Colonel Fairfax, a brave soldier who lies in the Tower under sentence of death on a fictitious charge, is anxious to be married before he is beheaded, in order to frustrate the evil designs of a kinsman who will succeed to his estate if he dies a bachelor. The Lieutenant of the Tower, an old friend, undertakes to find him a bride. Jack Point and Elsie Maynard, two poor strolling players, then arrive on Tower Green, followed by an expectant and unmannerly crowd, to whom they perform. The Lieutenant disperses the rabble, and with a promise of an hundred crowns and immediate widowhood, induces Elsie to marry the condemned man then and there.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Meryll, of the Yeomen of the Guard, has been scheming to effect the rescue of Fairfax, and, aided by his daughter, Phœbe, he obtains the key of the dungeon surreptitiously from Wilfred Shadbolt, the 'head-jailer and assistant tormentor.' Fairfax is hastily released. He shaves off his beard, dons the uniform of a Yeoman, and is publicly claimed by Sergeant Meryll as his brave son Leonard who has returned from the wars to join the Tower Warders. The time for the execution approaches, the bell tolls, the headsman takes his place at the block. Yeomen are told off to fetch the prisoner, but hastily return with the tidings that he has escaped. The news causes consternation, and Elsie faints in the arms of the supposed Leonard Meryll as the people rush off in confusion to search for the condemned man.

In the second act night has fallen, and the old Tower bears an even grimmer aspect. We see Jack Point and the Jailer in low spirits—for Point is in love with Elsie and her husband still lives, whilst Shadbolt is suspected of complicity in the escape. They confer together and decide to pretend to shoot an imaginary Fairfax as he is attempting to swim across the Thames. A shot is fired, and Shadbolt's 'cock-and-bull story' of seeing the prisoner sink under the water, corroborated by Jack Point, is accepted by the populace, who acclaim him as a hero and carry him off shoulder-high.

Fairfax, still in disguise, meets Elsie, woos her, and wins her love. The real Leonard Meryll then hastens in with a belated reprieve for the prisoner—which allows Fairfax to reveal himself, in dramatic fashion, to his wife, now wooed and won.

The *dénouement*, however, has its tragic side—for Phœbe Meryll is paired off with the repulsive Wilfred Shadbolt (as the price of his silence) and her father (for similar reasons) has to promise marriage to the old housekeeper of the Tower, whom he hates; whilst 'poor broken-hearted Jack Point' (the most pathetic figure of all) drops insensible at the feet of his adored Elsie as the curtain falls.

This is a somewhat heavy story, but it is handled with a light touch. The humour is, however, less successful than usual, for the familiar Gilbertian methods of jesting to which the author constantly reverts seem a little out of place amidst serious surroundings. His

pleasantries about the rack and the thumbscrew, and about the uncongenial alliances between the attractive and unattractive characters, when stripped of the customary absurd setting, often seem a little tasteless and unhappy, and it is difficult to laugh at them. In *The Mikado* we could be heartily amused at executions and the tortures of boiling-oil or being buried alive, whilst the supreme ugliness of Katisha, and Ko-Ko's despicable methods of wooing her, were so extravagant that nobody could object to them as unfit topics for comic treatment. But in *The Yeomen* the stage is peopled with more or less comprehensible human beings with whom we are definitely invited to sympathize. Either the serious appeal of the story is bound to suffer, or the humour must lose its savour. Sometimes both these artistic disasters happen at once.

Nevertheless, the libretto has found many admirers. After all it is extremely well constructed, and if the more earnest lines are apt to become somewhat stilted in expression, the lyrics include some of the best that Gilbert ever made—as well as some of the very worst.

If it is difficult to praise the author's share in this opera without many reservations, it is equally difficult to deal as generously as one would wish to do with the music as a whole, although the composer had a subject here which appealed to him through and through, and one which afforded him a welcome avenue of escape from the habitual musical effervescence which he had so continually been required to contribute to the previous

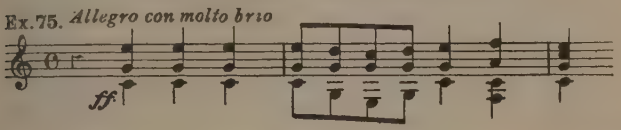
operas. The out-and-out Sullivan enthusiast is in the habit of alluding to *The Yeomen of the Guard* as the most beautiful example of his idol's work. One may freely admit that the opera contains many numbers which disclose a kind of dignified poetical content which is absent from his previous writing. There is also an added flavour of romanticism imparted to the more lyrical sections of the music which makes them specially appealing.

At the same time in none of the more successful Savoy operas are Sullivan's limitations so apparent as in this. In none does he so clearly confess that he was not a resourceful composer of really dramatic music. The situations call in several places for exciting treatment. Sullivan's one and only method of dealing with a dramatically thrilling moment in this opera is to plunge on a rapidly reiterated chord of the diminished seventh. This is an old trick which loses force by constant employment. It is resorted to when the news is brought of Fairfax's disappearance, and again when the Lieutenant of the Tower, startled by the discharge of the arquebus, rushes on to demand, "Who fired that shot?" Lastly it accompanies Elsie's sudden recognition of her husband at the end of the opera.

Nevertheless, even in the dramatic sections there are some lively imaginative touches that hold our interest as soon as the supremely exciting moment is over. The ending of the first act is a good example of this. Whilst the news of the escape and the imme-

liate excitement of the populace are inadequately dealt vith, there is a fine expression of determination in the heme which accompanies the dispersal of the crowd—
theme which has real dramatic significance.

Ex.75. *Allegro con molto brio*



Every composer knows how difficult it is to sustain he interest after a climax, and in this respect Sullivan certainly shows uncommon mastery here.

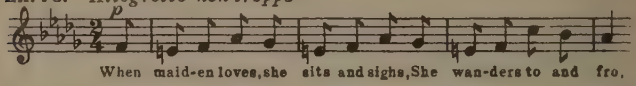
It is in the lighter and more lyrical episodes of the piece that the composer is naturally most at home, though even in these he is often, unexpectedly, less good than formerly. The two tenor solos, for instance, though not devoid of vocal fluency, lack distinction. This is the more noticeable in the first of them, "Is life a boon?" for Gilbert's verses here reach an unusual plane of excellence, reminding one, in their fanciful mageries, of the Elizabethan lyric-poets. The other tenor solo, "Free from his fetters grim," is redeemed from dullness by its charming *pizzicato* scoring, but it is again a good deal behind the best of its species.

Jack Point's two songs are also somewhat disappointing. They display quaint delicacy rather than humour. The queer little prelude of the first song, scored for wood-wind, is slightly stiff and artificial, but the crisp *pizzicato* chords in the orchestra give delightful colour to the otherwise undistinguished setting of the words

"I've wisdom from the East and from the West." The second song, "A private buffoon," is happy enough in a wistful restrained way, but if we compare the tune with its counterpart in the overture (see Ex. 81) we shall realize that it loses character by being forced to illustrate a set of somewhat uninspiring verses.

On the other hand we have, to counterbalance these comparative failures, the two songs allotted to Phœbe, which are a delight to think upon. "When maiden loves," sung at the spinning-wheel when the curtain rises on the first act, is an exquisite piece of lyrical music. The little curling melody is tinged with a mood of quiet regret, halting here and there that the singer may breathe the most musical of sighs,

Ex. 76. *Allegretto non troppo*



and always clothed in the daintiest orchestral garb.

The spinning-wheel has inspired many composers to do their best. One remembers Schubert's "Gretchen" (the greatest of all examples), Wagner's chorus in *The Flying Dutchman*, and Mendelssohn's less-known song in *Son and Stranger*. Sullivan's achievement, 'with its sad heigh-ho,' is fully worthy to take its place in this gallery of little masterpieces.

"Were I thy bride," Phœbe's second solo, is sung as she wheedles her gloomy lover, Wilfred Shadbolt, in order that she may extract the dungeon key, unnoticed,

from his waistband. Its musical charm is frequently lost in performance through the indiscretions (and worse) of the comedian who plays Wilfred. It can be examined on paper, though unfortunately the pianoforte accompaniment in the vocal score is a very poor reproduction of the orchestral setting.[1] As regards the melody of this song, which seems so absolutely spontaneous, the composer himself revealed the process of its evolution in a page of sketches which is reproduced in facsimile in Arthur Lawrence's biography of Sullivan.[2] The sketches show as many as eight experimental rhythms (without notes) with which the verses might be musically fitted. It appears that rhythm and melody were always separate things in Sullivan's mind. Rhythm invariably came first, and it was not until a verse was complete in 'dots and dashes' that he began to think about the tones or the melodic curve.

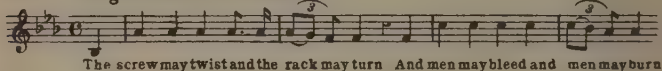
While dealing with the solo music of this opera, two further songs, differing as widely in mood from each other as from the songs already mentioned, remain to be discussed. These are the Ballad of Dame Carruthers in the first act, in which she describes how the old Tower, "a sentinel unliving and undying," keeps its solemn watch and ward over London, and the recitative and Aria sung by Elsie immediately after her wedding.

[1] See Ex. 104, on page 226.

[2] *Sir Arthur Sullivan*, by Arthur Lawrence. London: James Bowden, 1899.

The Dame's song has a dark-coloured beauty all its own. It is preluded by a quite noble rhythmic passage, which is used as a *leit-motiv* typifying the Tower on several occasions in the course of the opera (see Ex. 80). The deep, if relentless expressiveness of the refrain is especially significant:

Ex. 77. *Allegro moderato e maestoso*



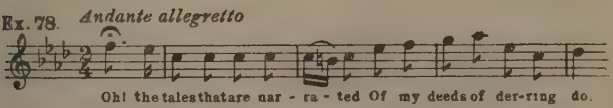
This theme is taken up by the Yeomen in chorus, and they invest it with a kind of majestic gloom; there is nothing finer or more sincere to be found in any of Sullivan's works.

Elsie's Aria (following a recitative of true expressive quality) is more conventional, more florid and operatic, and (incidentally) far more elaborately accompanied. It embodies sentiments which it is hard to believe any woman in such a situation could conceivably bring herself to express. But this is not the fault of the composer, who has evolved a thoroughly workmanlike if rather cold and impassive Scena of considerable proportions out of very unpromising material.

Apart from the solo work one can expatiate with pleasure upon some of the choral writing of the first act, and upon a good deal of the concerted music—especially that of Act II. The Yeomen always make a brilliant picture for the eye, and Sullivan has given them music of great earnestness to sing. He knows the

imposing effect of chords for horns and bassoons combined with male voices, but he does not overwork the combination. The four-part setting, "In the autumn of our life," is wonderfully rich and sonorous. The big double chorus (in which the voices of the crowd sing their "Tower Warders" tune in four parts against a simple unison passage for the Yeomen) is perhaps the best instance of big-scale choral writing in the opera: the scene at the beginning of the first Finale (where the supposed Leonard Meryll is presented to the Yeomen, who extol his virtues both in solo and chorus), is undoubtedly the worst. At this point the music comes perilously near to banality, and even crosses the line, when the gallant Fairfax is called upon to give expression to his modesty in a tune which, to say the least, is unfortunate:

Ex. 78. *Andante allegretto*

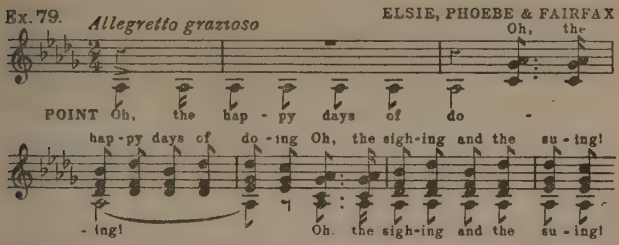


It is true that the rest of the Finale introduces us to some better things. There is some pleasant humour in Fairfax's tardy recognition of "sister Phœbe" and in the Trio, "From morn till afternoon" (though this is unduly prolonged in the matter of kissing and embracing), and the solemnity of the funeral-march which is used for the headsman's procession is genuinely felt, if not strongly moving. As a whole, however, the chief situations of this Finale are not negotiated with

quite the firm hand that a really dramatic composer would have brought to bear upon them, although (as has already been noted) the ending is vital and masterly.

In dealing with the concerted numbers of the second act the place of honour in popular estimation would probably be awarded to the Quartet, "Strange Adventure," which has some kinship with the madrigal in *The Mikado* in respect of vocal style, but it is not quite so interesting in its component parts. Except for a plaintively graceful four-bar introduction, which is referred to again in the coda, it is planned for voices alone. The melody is unmistakably English, and the harmonization as natural as it is charming.

The Trio for Elsie, Phœbe and Fairfax ("If he's made the best use of his time") is a light-hearted piece with a swinging rhythm, but it is surpassed in every way by the Quartet which almost immediately succeeds it, where the same three singers are joined by Jack Point. This is the one really subtle touch in the opera. The situation has veered round from comedy to something very like tragedy. Phœbe has lost the 'brother' she has learnt to love, and the poor jester, outwitted by Fairfax, "wishes he was dead." The music, though still light in texture, has an undercurrent of gentle pathos. The simple recurring melody is strangely moving, one hardly knows why. It is difficult to believe that the situation could have evoked so touching and unaffected a response from any other composer :


Ex. 79.
Allegretto grazioso
ELSIE, PHOEBE & FAIRFAX
Oh, the
POINT Oh, the hap - py days of do -
hap - py days of do - ing Oh, the sigh - ing and the su - ing!
- ing!
Oh, the sigh - ing and the su - ing!

Two further episodes of outstanding excellence remain to be commented upon. One is the duet for Point and Shadbolt in Act II, which is sung after they have devised their "cock-and-bull" story. This is the only unbridled piece of jollity which the opera affords. It has the merriest dancing rhythm, "never flagging" and "wag-a-wagging" from first bar to last (see Ex. 106, page 229).

The other is the music which is associated with the first appearance of Jack Point and Elsie. Their entry is prepared for by a chorus of the populace. In this Sullivan had the task of setting what must rank amongst the worst lyrics ever offered to a composer. Could it be that Gilbert thought that anything was good enough for an eager rabble of ignorant people to sing? Operatically the assumption is perhaps permissible. In one of his later librettos (not set by Sullivan) he makes the stage crowd assert that

"No single word
Is ever heard
When singers sing in chorus!"

Even at the Savoy, where good diction was the rule rather than the exception, this may have been a half-truth.

But, even so, the composer must have something settable, and the libretto and vocal score have to be printed. The last consideration alone, one would have thought, might have caused Gilbert some uneasiness in regard to the appearance of such jingling rubbish as this:

"Here's a man of jollity,
Jibe, joke, jollify!
Give us of your quality,
Come, fool, follify!

"If you vapour vapidly,
River runneth rapidly,
Into it we fling
Bird who doesn't sing!"

Even the poet Bunn might envy the clumsy stupidity of such verses!

Taking the line of least resistance Sullivan converts them into a babbling unison, changing the time frequently, even employing 5–4 here and there, which was extremely unusual in the days before Tschaïkowsky set the fashion. On the whole the result is as picturesque as possible.

The legend of the "Merryman and his Maid," for which this unintelligible gabbling is intended to prepare us, is one of the most familiar of all the melodies from Sullivan's operas—far too familiar to need textual quotation here. It is curious that the words of "I have a song to sing, O!" should have given the composer so much trouble to set—as we know they did—for they are neatly turned and have an irregularity which is always more conducive to good melody-making than

lines which have a conventional rhythmic formation. Possibly he was disturbed by the ever-lengthening verses, and could not devise a type of tune which was capable of being stretched out. In any case the result proves that he ultimately did hit upon a way of proceeding which was inevitably the right one. He took refuge in the uttermost simplicity—a drone bass and two chords only.

Above this he unfolded the long wayward tune we know so well. It is like the music for a puppet-play, with a hurdy-gurdy droning a "doleful dirge, dingdong, O!" The plaintive refrain

> "Heighdy! Heighdy!
> Misery me, lackayday dee!"

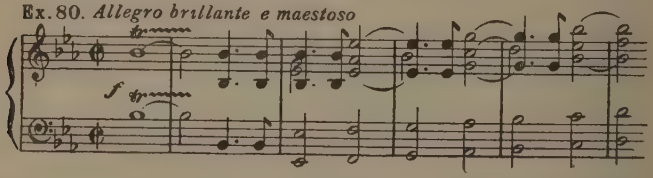
is beautifully felt and, once heard, remains in the memory more insistently than anything else in the piece. This is exactly what it was wanted to do, for the ditty was to become the motto, the dominant note of the drama. Had Sullivan failed here the opera itself could not have held our affection in the way that it does.

When the chorus, after the last verse, sing their wailing "oo's" and "ah's," and the sad lingering melody draws to a close, everybody realizes that, despite his motley, the little merryman is to be a pathetic figure in the play. The true pathos of this music is not to be felt in full, however, till the end of the opera, where the story of the merryman and his maid acquires a new significance, and the refrain is extended in a coda of touching quality, which culminates in the collapse of Jack Point at Elsie's feet as the curtain falls. Once

more we realize that Sullivan's uttermost simplicity is his surest road to our hearts. The difficult problems in music are sometimes only to be solved in the most primitive way by a genius who has the courage to throw off his thinking-cap and meet his hearers with the confidence of a trusting child.

It is evident that Sullivan regarded *The Yeomen of the Guard* as an opera of special importance in the series, for it was the only one furnished with an overture in strict symphonic form. The themes upon which it is based are all drawn from the opera itself, but they frequently take on new aspects. It opens with the Tower *leit-motiv*, alluded to on page 162:

Ex. 80. *Allegro brillante e maestoso*

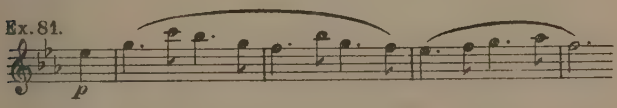


This, with a corollary derived from the refrain of Dame Carruthers' song (see Ex. 77) occupies the score for some space. There is a gracious 'tributary' theme (a chromatic version of the opening melody of "When a wooer goes a wooing") and a definite second-subject, adapted from Phœbe's song, "Were I thy bride."

With these materials, strengthened by a chain of rhythmic passages which are founded on Example 75 (quoted from the first Finale on page 159), the composer succeeds in constructing a bright symphonic movement,

beautifully scored and abounding in neat thematic evolutions. One of the most delightful examples of musical 'translation,' however, arrests attention in the course of the development, when the clarinet announces a smooth version of Jack Point's 6–8 patter-song, "O a private buffoon,"—a phrase worth quoting on its own account:

Ex. 81.



Equipped with subject-matter which is always interesting and vital, and orchestrally coloured with complete mastery and assurance, this overture is certainly one of the outstanding light works of English music. Its existence gives the lie direct to the hasty, unthinking assertion of Dr. Ernest Walker referred to on page 20.

Before closing these dissertations upon an opera which, with all its defects, has established for itself a firm position in our national art, a last word must be spoken which is not altogether a pleasant word to speak.

There are, no doubt, some good arguments to be advanced for the present guardianship of the rights of the Gilbert and Sullivan pieces in general, but *The Yeomen of the Guard* has suffered terribly from what are called 'traditions'—from a slavish adherence to methods of interpretation which have grown up imperceptibly around it and have gradually come to be regarded as authoritative. The way in which it is now customary

to play the opera is entirely and most distressingly wrong. Its humour is ruined by exaggeration and bustling energy, and episodes which should be merely regretful or pathetic in the quietest way are acted with a forced tragic intensity which is woefully out of tune with the general tone of the piece and hopelessly antagonistic to the character of the music.

It is unquestionably a difficult opera to play convincingly, since the changes of mood are too sudden. But problems of this kind are not incapable of artistic solution. Those who are old enough to recall the way in which *The Yeomen* was presented during its original run can testify that it had a mood of its own (not two conflicting and irreconcilable moods), that there was no over-acting, that there was plenty of quiet comedy but no pantomime tricks, and that the pathos was never torn to tatters. Quite frankly the music is not of a character to bear either one extreme or the other, for it deliberately pursues a midway course throughout.

The grace of such a fragile thing as "Were I thy bride," for instance, vanishes altogether when Phœbe behaves like a musical-comedy soubrette and Shadbolt like a clown. Nowadays it seems that they are both too obviously angling for an encore—and an encore here is absolutely ruinous to the continuity of the play, though it is always given.

At the other extreme there is the pitiful case of "I have a song to sing O!" The function of this song is to give unity to the opera. It is generally made a

piece of sheer mountebankery in the first act, and so quickened at the finish that its wistful simplicity is lost;[1] whereas at the end of the opera it is distorted into a piece of almost unrecognizable sob-stuff by a deathly-pale staggering jester, anxious to prove at all costs that he is a great tragedian.

And what is to be said of that terribly destructive accretion—the death of Jack Point? It has been stated that Gilbert approved of an interpretation which upsets the whole character of the work. But did he? It is impossible to believe it. His own stage directions are clear enough—"Jack Point falls *insensible*" at the feet of Elsie and Fairfax. He never altered these directions in any subsequent editions of the play—they stand thus in Macmillan's collected edition, which is certainly authoritative. That Point should be made the one central figure to which all eyes are directed at the final curtain not only destroys the unity of the work, again, but gives an entirely false prominence to this character. Until *The Yeomen of the Guard* is played temperately, as it should be played, it will be impossible to assess its value as an opera.[2]

[1] No change of tempo is marked in the original MS. score or in the printed piano score.

[2] Since the above was written, an interesting article dealing with the so-called traditional renderings of the Savoy operas has appeared in *The Gilbert and Sullivan Journal* (December, 1927). The writer is Miss Jessie Bond, a delightful singer and actress who created the *mezzo* parts in many of the original productions. After referring to the deplorable mangled version of *The Mikado* which has lately (1927) achieved popular

If the firm hold, which the owners of the performing rights maintain, to enforce what is called the 'traditional' interpretation of the piece, were relaxed, we might conceivably witness some even worse distortions than we do now. That is true. But, on the other hand, we might at last have a chance of seeing a performance of the opera which would be both homogeneous and truthful. It is a work which offers great attractions to a producer artistic enough to realize that he is dealing with a light opera tinged with seriousness, and not either a tragic opera with broad comic relief, or a comic opera which took the wrong turning.

The distinctions are vital. But it is to be feared that the world may have to wait till 1961, which is a long time, for Sullivan's real *Yeomen of the Guard*.

success in Germany, Miss Bond asks "Have we clean hands—quite clean hands—even in England?" The "tricks and antics which seem to have been made part of our present-day performances," she adds, "would never, never, have been tolerated for a moment at the Savoy." With regard to the "senseless business" now adopted in "Were I thy bride" in *The Yeomen of the Guard*, Miss Bond is horrified with "the scratching of the jailer's chin, the ruffling of his hair, the ogling of the eyes, and all those other 'comic' antics which, goodness knows why, are supposed to be 'funny.'" "I think it is wicked," she goes on to say, "that there should be this vulgarity in one of the loveliest of all the songs in the operas. Sir William Gilbert would not have endured it for a moment. He intended that the audience should hear his most beautiful lyric—and they never hear it to-day. Sir Arthur Sullivan would not have stood it either. The air he had written was far too sweet to be drowned beneath silly laughter." The present writer feels that his criticisms on these matters, which are bound to meet with some opposition, are greatly strengthened by this independent corroboration from such an authoritative source.

The Yeomen of the Guard, which ran for over a year, was succeeded by *The Gondoliers, or The King of Barataria*, produced on December 7, 1889. In this the librettist and composer returned to their early methods. It was frankly a comic opera, not devoid of romantic episodes, but as light-hearted and as inconsequential as any of its forerunners. It gained at once a striking popular success. We are told that on the first day that the piano-score was issued 20,000 copies were despatched by the publishers, and it was difficult to keep pace with the extraordinarily continuous demand on the part of the public.

Gilbert's share in the work was in every respect masterly. Few comic operas of any period have a better constructed libretto than this, and neither the dialogue nor the lyrics were wanting in volatile wit, shapeliness or charm.

The scene of the first act is laid on the Grand Canal in Venice. The two gondoliers, Marco and Giuseppe Palmieri, on the day of their wedding to the Contadine, Gianetta and Tessa, receive the news that one of them is no less a personage than the King of Barataria. It is not known which of the two is the real monarch since (as had happened before in the world of Gilbert's fancy) they were mixed up as babies. The rightful heir to the crown was, however, wedded in infancy to Casilda the beautiful daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Plaza Toro, who turn up in Venice, in an impecunious condition, to claim him, accompanied by their 'Suite,' in

the person of a solitary drummer-boy called Luiz (secretly in love with Casilda). Since it is impossible immediately to discover which of the gondoliers is to occupy the throne it is decided that they shall both depart at once for Barataria to reign jointly until the mystery is solved.

For the second act, therefore, we are transported to the Royal Palace of Barataria, where we see Marco and Giuseppe surrounded by their Venetian friends (who now occupy important offices in the state) grappling with the difficult problem of ruling their kingdom on the strictest republican principles. Matters are complicated by the arrival of their wives, but eventually the prince's foster-mother is found, who discloses the fact that the rightful heir is the drummer-boy Luiz, her supposed son. So the Venetians go back to their gondolas, happily enough, and Luiz, united to Casilda, is crowned king.

Now although this slender story concerns itself mainly with the fortunes of Marco and Giuseppe, they are by no means the most prominent personages in the action. Gilbert, it is said, was tired of the pretentious airs which some of the Savoy company were cultivating, and expressed his intention of writing an opera which should have no principal characters. *The Gondoliers* was the result. The honours are certainly divided very evenly between the gondolieri and their wives, the Duke of Plaza Toro, his Duchess and his daughter, and a very lugubrious gentleman in black called the Grand Inquisitor of Spain, who seems very greatly

concerned in the fortunes of Barataria, and acts as philosopher in general, whenever the occasion permits.

Anyhow it is a very pleasant and beguiling little fairy-tale, gaily told for our amusement. Incidentally, but only incidentally, there is some satire in it. It is a very gentle satire, aimed mainly at socialistic principles, for the two gondoliers endeavour to remodel the government of the kingdom over which they are called upon to preside on the basis that everybody is as important as everybody else. There is a Noble Lord who rules the state, a Noble Lord who cleans the plate, and a Noble Lord who scrubs the grate—a Lord High Bishop orthodox, a Lord High Coachman on the box, and even a Lord High Vagabond in the stocks. The thing must be done thoroughly or not at all. Everybody takes a hand at everybody else's job, and the joint monarchs themselves, though "if business isn't heavy they may hold a Royal *levée*," are very much occupied in polishing up the regalia, and even in "running little errands for the ministers of state." It is the Grand Inquisitor, the individualist, who bursts the bubble with his logic:

> "When every one is somebodee
> Then no-one's anybody,"

a phrase which soon became part of our common quotable language.

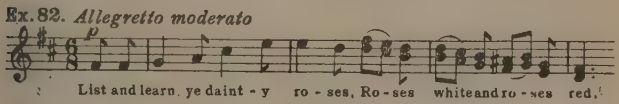
Sullivan's task of illustrating these pleasantries is carried out in the most ingratiating way. *The Gondoliers* is unquestionably the last wholly spontaneous work that he wrote. It is almost entirely joyous in mood.

If *Pinafore* is the most 'catchy' of the operas, *Iolanthe* and *Ruddigore* the most imaginative, *Patience* and *Princess Ida* the most dainty and delicate, *The Mikado* the most brilliant, and *The Yeomen* the most typically English, *The Gondoliers* is easily the most continuously sunny and untroubled. Technically it is unambitious, perhaps, as anything so radiantly careless in spirit is bound to be. But that does not mean that mastery is lacking. On the contrary the composer is moving so obviously within his own capabilities that he attempts nothing that he is not able to do to perfection. There are many who think that Sullivan wrote best when he thought least about it, and by these *The Gondoliers* will always be regarded as his best opera. There is certainly less music of the type that is sometimes spoken of as 'musicianly' than we find in *Iolanthe*, in *The Mikado* or *Ruddigore*. Most of it is purely surface music, music of the kind that 'goes in at one ear and comes out at the other.' At the same time one is astonishingly ready to permit it to make this same little journey over and over again. One can see and hear this opera many times with pleasure.

The first act, with its attractive Venetian setting, its almost continuous movement and its invariably pleasing melodies, is on the whole the most satisfying section of the piece, though Act II has many graces and plenty of enlivening humour to commend it. The loosely strung chain of gay tunes which forms the overture puts one in the right frame of mind to enjoy what is to

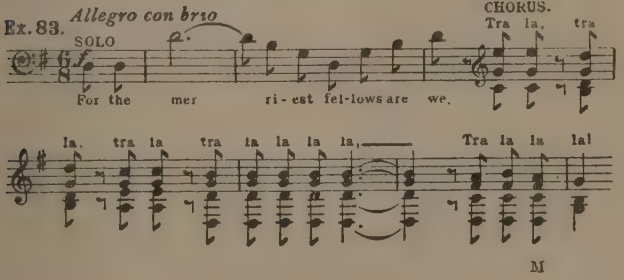
come in an uncritical spirit. As the curtain rises on the bright scene on the Piazzetta the opening chords, and the whole rhythmic throb of the orchestral prelude, are like a flood of sunshine; and the melody which the Contadine sing, as they bind their bunches of roses, is full of southern warmth and richness. One remembers that Sullivan had Italian blood in his veins:

Ex. 82. *Allegretto moderato*

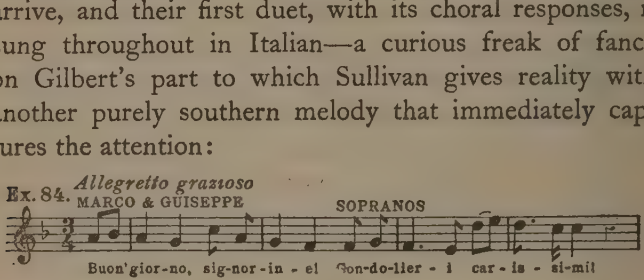


The little solo passages, too, are charmingly in the picture.

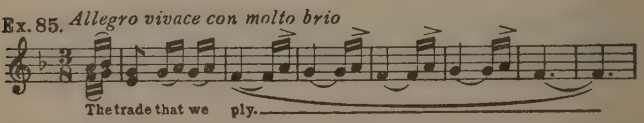
To accompany the quiet entry of a group of gondolieri we have some equally engaging music, the wayward, tripping phrases in the strings blending delightfully with the independent lines of vocal melody, as the girls and the men converse in song. Then there is a sudden change from B flat to G major (another sunny moment) and we plunge into the bounding lilt of Antonio's joyous song:

Ex. 83. *Allegro con brio*

Even in a score full of good things this stands out as a specially striking inspiration. Marco and Giuseppe arrive, and their first duet, with its choral responses, is sung throughout in Italian—a curious freak of fancy on Gilbert's part to which Sullivan gives reality with another purely southern melody that immediately captures the attention:

Ex. 84. *Allegretto grazioso*



After this we have a further duet of more extensive proportions, none the less attractive because it is frankly Neapolitan in style rather than Venetian, as will be seen from the elongated cadences which constantly recur:

Ex. 85. *Allegro vivace con molto brio*

This shows so close a resemblance to the real Italian folk-song type that it is difficult to believe it is by an English composer. The musical idioms of Italy, like those of Spain, seem to have a peculiar attraction for composers of other nations, whilst Italian musicians, even of modern times, preserve their native traditions with wonderful faithfulness. We may remember how Richard Strauss in his early Symphonic Fantasia, "Aus Italien," built up an entire movement on the popular song "Funiculi, Funicula," only to find out afterwards

that he had been elaborating not a folk-tune at all, as he supposed, but the original work of an Italian contemporary, Luigi Denza, who lived and taught singing in England until quite recently. It is, however, very surprising to find in the work of an Englishman a melody which might, equally easily, be seized upon in error by some foreign master as a typically Italian product. But such, undoubtedly, is this remarkably spontaneous setting of "We're called gondolieri," with its imitation of the lazy thrumming of mandolines, and its careless 'tra-la-las'.

"And now to choose our brides," sings Marco.

> "As all are young and fair
> And amiable besides,
> We really do not care
> A pref'rence to declare,"

and so the men are blindfolded and undertake to marry "any two of you we catch." To the tune of a nursery rhyme (an English one, probably, if nursery rhymes have any nationality at all) the four and twenty Contadine slowly move round their two favourites in circles and the chase begins. Gianetta is captured by Marco and Tessa by Giuseppe, and both of the gondolieri express themselves delighted with the result. It is an entrancing scene.

The orchestra strikes up a gay waltz, to which Gianetta sings an equally gay measure in 2–4 time. And so with undiminished brightness and glow the music moves forward. A simple choral ensemble is

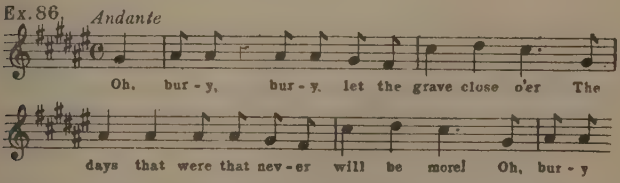
built up, still combining the two rhythms, and reaches a final pitch of exultation with a return of the Contatadine's first melody (Ex. 82) as the merry company dances off to the wedding.

Nothing in *The Gondoliers* is so remarkable as the completeness and unity of this long opening scene which is like a miniature opera in itself, continuous, self-contained and all-of-a-piece. Without a break there is a sound of trumpet and side-drum, as a gondola floats alongside the quay and the Duke and Duchess of Plaza Toro alight with their daughter and Luiz. It is time for a definite contrast, perhaps, but the music falls lamentably to a lower level here, and is scarcely tolerable to the musical ear. The humour of the drummer-boy's sharp interruptions alone does something to save the situation. We realize that this long sunny dream is bound to have an awakening, but it is nevertheless something of a shock when the music stops abruptly and the Duke begins to speak.

It is conceivable that to unmusical people, and people who think more of Gilbert's wit than Sullivan's melody, speech may come as a relief, but to many of us it always causes an unpleasant jar at this point. The music has continued for so long (it must be nearly half an hour of unbroken fluency) that one is in tune with melody and out of tune with the spoken word. Our attention is, of course, soon engrossed with the ducal humours of Plaza Toro, who to restore his fortunes has turned himself into a Limited Liability Company and issued his

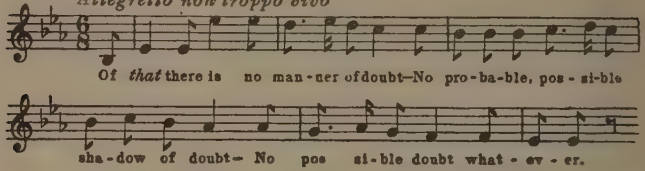
prospectus. It is not until he and the Duchess have departed to interview the Grand Inquisitor, however, that the composer gets his next real chance. Luiz and Casilda, left alone, sing a love-duet which is not only amongst the most tender and expressive of all Sullivan's melodies, but by far the most seriously beautiful piece of music which this opera contains. At first the tonality hovers between F sharp major and D major in a fascinating way, but settles down in the former key for the final section of each verse, where the words and music are in the most perfect accord, and the accompaniment provides a background of exceptional beauty (see Ex. 100, page 222).

Ex. 86. *Andante*



The Grand Inquisitor's famous song, "I stole the Prince" is, in quite another way, a noteworthy instance of Sullivan's almost uncanny art of word-setting. The music, as music, is by no means remarkable. Even the verses, by themselves, are not of commanding merit. The closing lines of every stanza are, indeed, merely the elaboration of a platitude. But let us examine closely the way in which the music to which they are united makes them trip off the tongue:

Ex. 87 *Allegretto non troppo vivo*



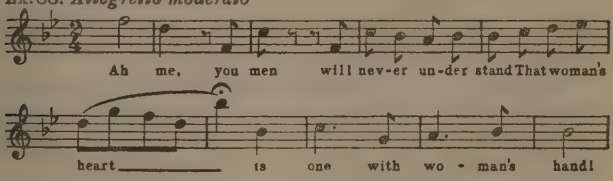
It must be admitted that what has become a familiar catch-phrase owes its existence, as such, to the rhythmic meaning which is given to it by the composer. Who would have remembered it for five minutes if it had not been for Sullivan?

The Quintet "Try we life-long," is effective enough in a bustling way, if not specially noteworthy, but when the gondoliers return with their brides we have a graceful little ditty for Tessa, "When a merry maiden marries," with a supple melody which, at first, was criticized for its supposed resemblance to a popular drawing-room song of the time. This coincidence was pointed out to Sullivan, who declared that he had never heard the song in question. Never consciously, perhaps, but how could it have been possible for him to move about London, in those days of multitudinous barrel-organs, without having his ears assailed by "Love's old sweet song"? That, however, is neither here nor there. What does deserve to be remembered is his remark that "after all we had each of us only eight notes to work upon." This ranks, as a classic retort, with the comment attributed to Brahms, when a theme in his C minor Symphony was pronounced

to be but a variant of the famous melody which opens the Finale of Beethoven's No. 9—"every fool can see that." It is the mood which makes a melody what it is, rather than the fortuitous juxtaposition of notes. Tessa's song, at all events, has a mood of its own, and the effect of the music is greatly enhanced when the chorus creeps in, towards the close, with a *sotto voce* chordal accompaniment in broken phrases—a little stroke of fancy which is both novel and happy.

The Finale to the act opens with a song for Gianetta, "Kind sir, you cannot have the heart," an appeal to the Grand Inquisitor to allow Marco and Giuseppe to take their wives with them to Barataria. This has a melody of much persuasiveness, but a great deal of its effect depends upon the dainty background of *pizzicato* figures and wood-wind phrasing which the orchestra provides. The concluding lines are set with a rhythmic freedom which accentuates the pleading character of the lyric and, while the singer is given a good chance for an expansive vocal finish, the artistry of the setting is by no means compromised for the sake of her top note.

Ex. 88. *Allegretto moderato*



With some reassuring words, in recitative, from the

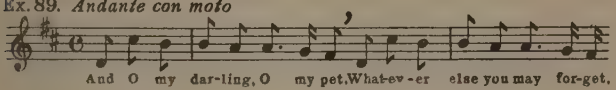
Grand Inquisitor, confidence is restored and gaiety resumed in a remarkably ebullient Quartet for the gondoliers and their wives—"A regular Royal Queen." It is the unflagging energy of the rhythm which carries us off our feet here; we do not stop to consider if the tune is a good one—perhaps it is not—but the impetus of the music is tremendous. If we are anxious to know how this energy is impelled, let us take our vocal score and look at the construction of the refrain. We swing along for three bars, and then with an accent on the second beat of the fourth bar we kick off again, to halt for another accent in the same place four bars later. Lastly there is the "right down regular, regular, regular," thumping of the verbal accents to form a finish. It seems an easy thing to achieve—the rhythm is there already in the words, no doubt—but if we tried to set them anew we should discover that no mere careful calculations could give us the rapture and sparkle which turns a succession of jingling syllables into live musical exhilaration. We are told that on the first night of the opera the occupants of the pit and gallery provided an extempore *entr'acte* by whistling this tune with the greatest energy, to the amusement of the more staid patrons in stalls and circle. It had got into their heads like strong wine. It is still capable of intoxicating an audience to-day, for it belongs to that vintage which seems to improve with age.

When the chorus enters to enquire the "cause of this remarkable hilarity" Marco and Giuseppe strike a

brotherly attitude and reply, jointly, in a tune of which they sing a bar each, in turn, irrespective of the words. A rather silly device, perhaps, but the tune is a good one. There is more genuine diversion in what succeeds to this—the swinging 6–8 melody in which the new monarchs undertake to provide congenial posts for their companions and promise them that "all shall equal be." The verses are very neatly rhymed, and Sullivan has caught the spirit of them admirably, though perhaps the music is a little too prolonged by repetition, considering the slightness of its interest, and the choral writing is of a somewhat elementary character. The best effect is secured at the end of the section, where the chorus sings a broad chorale-like passage, "Then Hail, O King," whilst the orchestra continues to be busy with the former 6–8 patterns.

Gianetta and Tessa then sing their brief farewells. Tessa's very chromatic melody is the more characteristic of the two. Nothing in the nature of pathos is attempted here, and wisely, but there is a note of real tenderness in the refrains, which, save for a change of key, are the same in each of the songs. The expressive use of the rising major seventh should not escape observation:

Ex. 89. *Andante con moto*



To the strains of a kind of Barcarolle the men now board their ship and hoist the sail. The music con-

trives to preserve its vitality, though there is an almost incredible lapse from the general excellence of the lyrics at this point:

"One, two, three,
Haul!
One, two, three,
Haul!
One, two, three,
Haul!
With a will!
When the breezes are a-blowing
The ship will be going,
When they don't we shall all stand still!"

A strangely childish, even ungrammatical effusion which Gilbert, once more, may have thought good enough for a chorus to sing, but which cannot have given much encouragement to the composer. The vocal ensemble, however, is quite successfully worked up, without the customary elaborations, and the stage-picture on which the curtains close is a highly effective one.

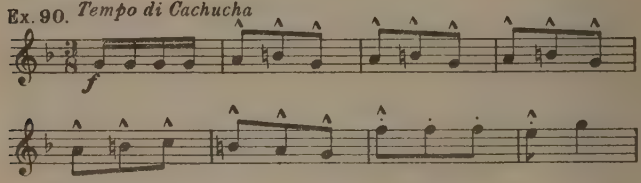
The music of the second act maintains the standard of cheerful melodiousness, but hardly calls for the detailed description that has been accorded to that of Act I. After a light opening chorus it consists chiefly of a succession of popular numbers of a wholly transparent character. There is Giuseppe's pattering ditty, "Rising early in the morning," a song which is strictly 'to type' and does not offer us anything new either in conception or carrying out: there is the familiar solo,

which has found its way into the repertory of every English tenor, "Take a pair of sparkling eyes"—a song which must be placed in the category of things too well-known for their merits to be readily gauged. This gives us yet another example of Sullivan's happy adoption of Italian idioms in this opera. It depends almost entirely upon the purely vocal character of its melody for its success. "Quite a miniature affair," perhaps, but the rise and fall of its phrases are beautifully balanced, one against the other. The accompaniment does not attempt much more than a succession of simple guitar-like chords, but this is all-sufficient.

The arrival of the wives brings us to a chorus with a bustling Tarantella rhythm—another importation of southern characteristics which has an authentic ring—and this gives way to the breathless impatient chatter of Gianetta and Tessa ("Tell us—tell us all about it") which is a capitally sustained piece of fun. As for the famous song and dance known as the Cachucha, it is yet another of those brilliantly-scored pieces of bubbling energy which make *The Gondoliers* such a surprising exhibition of youthful high spirits. The worst that could be said about it is that it is not particularly Spanish, in spite of the clattering of castanets and the employment of pretty well all the Spanish words that the average Englishman is likely to have heard of. It is pure unadulterated Sullivan, and might well be accepted in Spain as a typical example of British light music, just as *Carmen* is accepted there as representative of the

music of France. Perhaps nobody but Sullivan could have made so much of the enlivening insistence upon three notes which is the feature of the middle part of the tune:

Ex. 90. *Tempo di Cachucha*

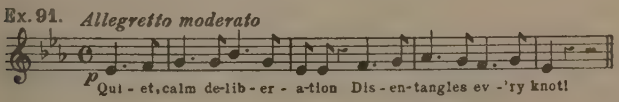


The Grand Inquisitor's song, "There lived a king," is the next number in this procession of popular things; here the humour of Gilbert's words stands foremost, and it is allowed full play in a very cleverly constructed melody which neither misses nor labours a single point. Such things as the adoption of a familiar Scottish formula of harmony to give emphasis to the word 'toddy,' and the illustrative use of the College Hornpipe to enforce the line "with Admirals the ocean teemed," are not subtle allusions by any means, but they are never allowed to break the flow of the melody or to become intrusive.

A far more original display of musical ingenuity is forthcoming, however, in the Quartet which follows, where Marco and Giuseppe and their wives propose to unravel the difficulties of their position with "quiet calm deliberation." It opens with the sedatest of melodies, sung three times through. At first it is in unison. Then it is continued *pianissimo* to the same words, but

each singer in turn comes forward to sing some emphatic comment (in quicker notes) upon the complications which have arisen, while the other three proceed with the melody. The second repetition of the tune is left almost entirely to the men, for Gianetta and Tessa grow more and more heated and excitable. At length the tune disappears altogether, and the four singers are engaged in a frenzied effort to shout each other down. Suddenly there is a pause and they all stop to reflect: the Quartet then finishes with four bars in the mood of gentle reflection with which it started:

Ex. 91. *Allegretto moderato*



This extraordinarily able piece of work is a unique example of Sullivan's comic powers. There is nothing quite resembling it anywhere in operatic literature. Unlike so many ensembles of this kind it is never unduly complicated or overcrowded with notes, and one can hear the words all through, except at the end, where, of course, it is intended to be a confused babel of conflicting sounds.

The rest of the act is concerned chiefly with the ducal pomps and the ducal humours of the Plaza Toro family. They are given an imposing entrance, with a march measure after the manner of the Peers in *Iolanthe*: there is a song for the Duchess (rather a jerky affair with an unvarying and not very vocal dotted-note rhythm), an

amusing duet ("Small titles and orders") and, lastly, the particularly charming and courtly Gavotte, in which the Duke gives Marco and Giuseppe an elaborate lesson in deportment.

A lively little Quintet leads straight into the brief Finale, where the prince's foster-mother is brought forward to make her disclosure, and Luiz is proclaimed King. All this is theatrically effective without attempting anything at all dramatic. The opera ends merrily with an arrangement for chorus of the 'Neapolitan' duet from Act I, and a brief reference to the invigorating rhythm of the Cachucha (Ex. 90).

The Gondoliers made an immediate appeal to the public. It filled the bill at the Savoy Theatre for five hundred and fifty-four consecutive performances, and was the biggest financial success of any of the productions at that theatre. Its popularity has never shown the smallest signs of waning.

If we regard such a work as of small account musically, because of its easy acceptance of ideas which do not call for any mental effort on the part of the listener, we must still acknowledge its importance in English music. Its melodies seem endowed with the gift of perpetual youth. Parry truly says, in his splendid book on *Style in Musical Art*, that "as there is a style for the greatest things so there is for the least." "Even comic operas," he continues—and the 'even' is characteristic of a man who was always impatient of the lighter pleasures of music—"even comic operas can be admirable when

the true style has been found. . . . There must be in all men's lives infinite degrees of mood from serious to playful. It is a very poor nature that can never be gay; but it is of great importance that the gaiety shall be of good and honest quality, and not degenerate into brutishness."

Sullivan in *The Gondoliers* gave us what is, perhaps, the gayest music England has ever produced, and who shall say that, with its undoubted 'good and honest quality,' it is not a finely characteristic example of our national art? It may be that the English people have less quickness of perception than many other nations, as Parry says, and that this causes them to give a readier ear to their light music than to their music of graver import. If that is the truth a genius like Sullivan is all the more valuable as a national asset, for, in appealing directly to the hearts of his countrymen, he has contrived without a suspicion of degeneration, to fill their minds with pleasant music which they can always love and call their own.

CHAPTER VIII

"IVANHOE" AND THE LAST SAVOY OPERAS

Sullivan's comic operas were, without a single exception, produced at the Savoy Theatre from the time of the opening of that building in 1881 until his death in 1900. It is, however, necessary at this point to bestow a passing glance elsewhere, in order to preserve the proper sequence of this narrative, and to account for certain tendencies which are to be observed in some of his later works for the stage.

It was during the run of *The Gondoliers* that the Royal English Opera House in Cambridge Circus (afterwards the Palace Theatre) was opened with a loud flourish of trumpets. Grand opera by British composers was at last to be rendered a practicable proposition. The now wealthy manager of the Savoy provided the wherewithal, and this fine theatre was built which was to be the permanent home of serious native art.

This is not the occasion for an attempt to explain away the disaster which befel so laudable an enterprise. All efforts to achieve progression by putting the cart before the horse are proverbially bound to fail, and this one failed lamentably. Cecil Forsyth put the case succinctly when he wrote of this ill-fated enterprise that

if the promoters "had made the same substantial provision for a supply of English operas that they made for a supply of bricks and mortar, the former would have run no more risk of collapsing than the latter." As it was, the management had apparently formulated no plans beyond those for the first production. For this, at Queen Victoria's suggestion it is said, the subject chosen was Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. A libretto was prepared by Julian Sturgis, which was set to music by Sullivan, and the new opera was first presented at the opening of the building, on January 31, 1891.

There is no doubt that Sullivan regarded the commission to compose *Ivanhoe* in the light of a great opportunity, and that he exerted himself to the fullest extent to achieve a work on a grand scale which should be of permanent value. We know that he had already begun to chafe at the restrictions imposed upon him by Gilbert and his Savoy audiences. He was desirous of extending the boundaries of English light opera and enlarging its scope. We find, in *The Yeomen of the Guard* especially, unmistakable evidences of his endeavour to create musical ideas which should express a more romantic and poetical outlook than Gilbert's usual whimsical librettos permitted. It is clear that when the opportunity came to compose a big serious opera, which should be produced with fitting elaboration, the composer quite consciously strove to carry his aspirations to fulfilment.

Sullivan was by this time a public idol. He had so

strongly endeared himself to his generation that it might be thought that he could easily have set a new standard, and moved with freedom outside the limits which he had so long imposed upon his fancy. But *Ivanhoe*, though it aroused great interest and had a remarkable run for an opera on a big scale, cannot, viewed at a distance, be pronounced an entire success.

It has been said that this opera is an English equivalent to the class of piece that is staged at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, and that we have no Opéra-Comique public in this country. The parallel is not very close, and in any case an opera which is a mere panorama of events without constructive unity, as *Ivanhoe* is, would stand no chance of success in any country where opera is a commonly understood and established activity. In regard to the effect that the work had upon its first English audience—an audience unlikely to institute comparisons or bother itself about dramatic unities—Sullivan may be said to have fallen between two stools. Those who expected an heroic work on a grand scale were disappointed. Those who listened for the Sullivan they knew and loved already, waited patiently until Friar Tuck's ballad, "Ho, Jolly Jenkin," came along, and then nodded their heads and smiled approvingly. But they, too, were inevitably disappointed.

Nevertheless there are some fine things in *Ivanhoe*.

The delicate prayer for Rebecca ("Lord of our chosen race"), with its throbbing rhythm on the violas, is a beautiful solo. Impressive, too, in quite another way, is

the Templar's monologue ("Woo thou thy snowflake"), which owes something to the later Verdi, and is the nearest approach to a really dramatic and passionate piece of music that Sullivan ever wrote. On the other hand it is impossible to overlook the fact that a great deal of the writing is on a rather low level of style, notably the chorus at the end of the first act, "Fair and lovely is the rose," in which a melody of distressing banality is developed at some length. The libretto, perhaps, contained little that was inspiring. The story, as it appeared in the stage version, was too hard and detached, and had not enough human interest to suit Sullivan, or to take the impress of his characteristics very readily. The composer was, moreover, so very much more at home in the few lighter moments the piece afforded than in the episodes which called for intensity or grandeur of treatment, that one could not help feeling that his choice of subject was unfortunate.

It is now necessary to return to our main consideration—Sullivan's work in the *métier* which suited him best. A chronicle of operatic happenings at the Savoy Theatre after the initial career of *The Gondoliers* was brought to a close must inevitably partake of the nature of anti-climax. Sullivan had reached the summit of his powers. He was not an old man, and the success which was firmly established at this theatre seemed likely to continue unbroken for at least another decade. But troubles arose which altered the course of events in a disastrous

way. There was a disagreement between Gilbert and the business management on a seemingly trivial financial matter: Sullivan was forced, against his will, to take sides, and the long artistic partnership between him and Gilbert was severed.

Alas! how easily things go wrong! The good ship Savoy Opera, as we now know, had often been steered with difficulty through stormy seas, but at last she had struck a rock, and though she was ultimately patched up and re-floated, life (the life of this joyous, playful, satisfying combination of wit and song) was never the same again.

The successor to *The Gondoliers*, by another author and another composer, failed to please the old patrons, in spite of the undoubted cleverness with which the traditional Savoy methods were imitated.[1] A different piece was tried, with even less success, and then the theatre was closed for three months. These events only served to intensify the sadness of the situation.

At last the announcement was made that a new work by Sullivan was forthcoming, and general interest was revived. Gilbert had turned to another composer and to a rival management (with a libretto rejected by Sullivan before *The Mikado* was written), and the Savoy found a substitute in Sydney Grundy, a popular writer of plays who had had a little, if not very much, experience in the field of comic opera. The result of the new combination was a 'Light English Opera' in three acts, called

[1] *The Nautch Girl*, by George Dance and Edward Solomon.

Haddon Hall, and this was produced on September 24, 1892. Its interpretation was entrusted to an able company of performers, most of whom had been associated in the Gilbert and Sullivan works for some years.

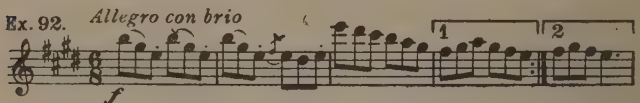
The opera had the advantage of a picturesque setting, and a quasi-historical romantic story, woven round the elopement of Dorothy Vernon. The clock of Time was put forward a century and many liberties taken with history in order that the stage might be peopled with gallant bands of Royalists, ludicrous figures of comic Puritans, etc. But whereas with Gilbert such a theme would have been treated in a riotously funny spirit, and anachronisms accepted as a matter of course, Grundy's *Haddon Hall*, cast in a far more serious vein, suffered dreadfully from the introduction of absurdities which jarred. In particular there was a specially irritating Scotsman called the McCrankie from the Isle of Rum. Even the bagpipes were introduced to cause a laugh, and the comedian who acted the part played them himself, but indifferently well. Nevertheless this libretto, hampered by humour which was not really amusing and a terrible preponderance of bad lyrics, seemed to give musical ideas to the composer.

To do the author justice it should be recorded (on his own authority) that for all the more important numbers he provided two versions, and that Sullivan generally chose the one which he felt should have been rejected. "What is the matter with the others?" he asked Sullivan, and the reply was, "Nothing—but I've

been setting them for fifteen years." Which shows not only how difficult it was to step into Gilbert's shoes but, at the same time, how anxious Sullivan was to break away from the habits he had formed, and to strike out in a new line.

A large proportion of the music is in Sullivan's best manner. The opera opens with a stately introduction and a chorus behind the scenes—some of the phrases of which are, however, almost too amusingly reminiscent of Captain Shaw's Brigade with their cool cascade! It is brief, and the curtain rises on a scene of merriment for which the composer has provided a jolly English dance, after the manner of those measures which Edward German has made so popular. This is the only familiar melody in the score, for it has been used in all the recent revivals of *The Sorcerer*, with happy effect:

Ex. 92. *Allegro con brio*



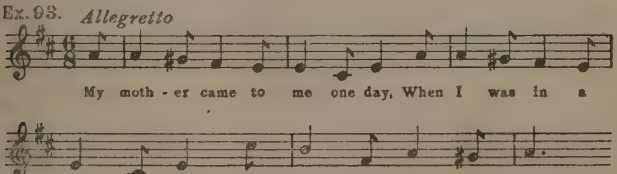
There is plenty of active energy throughout the opening scene, and the music continues without interruption for some time. There is a good pompous entry for the Lord of Haddon, and the section ends with a charming Old English piece—partly solo and partly madrigalian in style, with 'fa-la-las'—"When the budding bloom of Spring." This is quite worthy to rank with the so-called Madrigal in *The Mikado* or the Quartet, "Strange Adventure," in *The Yeomen of the*

Guard. Another good thing in the first act is a delightful Trio, with a dainty refrain to the not very inspiring words:

"Yea or nay?
Go or stay,
To which be false, to which be true?"

The entry of the Puritans is less well provided for —but the words are hopeless. The librettist, however, pulls himself together for Rupert Vernon's two songs, the second of which relates, much as Gilbert might have done, a youthful tragedy:

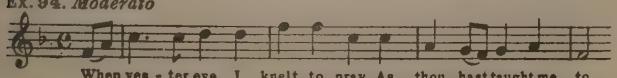
Ex. 93. *Allegretto*



This exemplifies, pretty neatly, in rhyme and tune, how one can be "deceived by first impressions," and the ending, to which the male chorus contributes a running accompaniment to the nondescript words "whack-fol-de-riddle-i-do," is very well done by Sullivan.

The effect of Dorothy Vernon's aristocratic song at the close of the act is a little discounted by the fact that it is preceded by another song in the same key, but it is provided with a beautiful, indeed a distinguished tune.

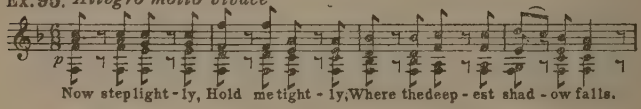
Ex. 94. *Moderato*



The words, however, are of the worst goody-goody moral precept order — with the customary similes about golden day and silver night, and clouds in the skies, and thorns on the roses.

The second act also contains some admirable music, especially a delicately-fashioned vocal Quartet, which is none the worse for a slight resemblance to a song in *Iolanthe*, because it has a certain character (if not a rhythm) which is all its own.

Ex. 95. *Allegro molto vivace*



The last act is noteworthy for an expressively melodic contralto solo, "Queen of the garden bloom'd the rose," but otherwise falls very much below the standard of the rest of the work, musically. The opera ends, effectively enough, with the tune of Dorothy Vernon's song.

One can believe that with a fresher libretto *Haddon Hall* would have borne revival, but as it stands resuscitation can hardly be looked for. Light opera which depends upon the charms of its music alone has never yet been known to succeed in England.

If the production of *Haddon Hall* provoked interest amongst Sullivan's admirers, the news that the two celebrated collaborators had somehow been brought together again, and that a brand new Gilbert and Sullivan opera was forthcoming, was hailed with transports of delight from a still wider circle, and the first

performance was made almost an occasion of national rejoicing. *Utopia Ltd., or The Flowers of Progress*, was the name of the new piece, and it was presented at the Savoy Theatre on October 7, 1893, the composer conducting. On his appearance in the orchestra Sullivan received an ovation which must have exceeded in warmth any public greeting he had ever enjoyed.

Never can an opera have been launched with such a vigorous predisposition in its favour. It must be confessed, however, that there was a general feeling of disappointment at the end of the evening, after the energy of the audience had been spent on their affectionate greetings of the old favourites, and the tumultuous applause had died away. *Utopia Ltd.* had told them little that they did not know before. Both author and composer had evidently striven deliberately to repeat the humours and graces of their previous works. They had succeeded to a certain extent in achieving a delectable blend, but comic opera, more than any other musical form, demands fresh ideas and first-hand piquancy of treatment.

Gilbert, in his previous librettos, had satirized almost every attribute of our civilization—naval, military, legal, parliamentary, social and artistic, each in turn. In this he sought to satirize the English nation, as it were, *en bloc*. His imaginary kingdom of Utopia, determined to govern itself in the most perfect way possible, imports six Flowers of Progress, representatives of England's greatness, who shall teach her how to govern and make

laws, how to behave, how to achieve business prosperity, how to run an Army and Navy, and so forth.

It was inevitable that most of the cynical commentaries previously inspired by these matters, singly, should crop up again and suffer greatly from lack of novelty. A great deal has been written about Gilbert's 'bad taste' in making fun of English Royal functions, and actually staging a mock Buckingham Palace Drawing-Room, as well as conducting an imitation Council at the Court of St. James's, after the fashion of the "Court of St. James's *Hall*"—in other words, like a nigger-minstrel show. But, as a matter of fact, these were quite the most amusing, as well as the only really original episodes of the piece, and were almost entirely innocent of offence.

The present writer is able to place on record, for the first time, one very interesting point touching upon this particular question. He was told by Gilbert himself that the only matter to which the Prince of Wales (King Edward VII) took exception, on seeing the opera, was the appearance of King Paramount in a British Field-Marshal's uniform, wearing the Order of the Garter, a combination which he alone, of all living men, was entitled to wear! Needless to say, the Garter was removed and all was well. Moreover, Gilbert was extremely proud of the effect of one little line in his dialogue. The first Utopian "Drawing-Room" is over, and the Lord Chamberlain and the company promoter from England are discussing the proceedings. "One

or two judicious innovations, I think?" says the Lord Chamberlain. "Admirable," is the reply. "The cup of tea and the plate of mixed biscuits were a cheap and effective inspiration." It seems that at Queen Victoria's "Drawing-Rooms" it had not been the custom to provide refreshments of any kind, but after the Prince had seen *Utopia Ltd.*, this omission (a serious one, since the proceedings were often terribly lengthy) was actually remedied forthwith.

We must turn from these digressions (which it is hoped may be pardoned since these interesting facts have not appeared in print before) to consider the music, which is, after all, our present concern. The lack of freshness in Gilbert's ideas would, perhaps, have mattered less than it did had Sullivan been able to clothe old verbal witticisms in new musical garments. But it was not so. The music, even more than the words, presented a series of numbers which led people to exclaim "How like so-and-so in such-and-such an opera," but with the inevitable reservation, "It's not nearly so good."

The opera certainly opens in a promising way. A group of Utopian maidens are reclining about the stage, 'in lotus-eating fashion,' and they sing a drowsy setting of some quite charmingly languorous verses. There is character, too, as well as some rhythmic novelty in the very simple chorus which accompanies the entrance of the two Wise Men of Utopia. When the wise men themselves come forward to sing to us, how-

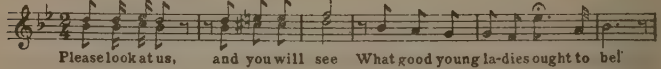
ever, we prick up our ears and wonder where we heard that tune before. Quickly realizing that it is associated in our minds with "the Chancellor in his peruke—The Earl, the Marquis and the Dook," we are happy to find ourselves indulging in pleasant memories. Then there is another duet, with a series of 'symbolic' dances, and we are quite sorry that it reminds us of nothing, for it leaves us wondering if such a stupid composition can possibly be by the composer whose style we know so well.

A chorus with a broad flowing melody ("Quaff the nectar—cull the roses"), restores our confidence somewhat, and there is a patter-song for the King which is a reasonably good example of its kind, but it is not until the two demure young Princesses enter, with Lady Sophy, their English 'Gouvernante,' that we get anything which seems like the blend of Gilbert and Sullivan as we love it best. The two little girls are delicious personages, on exhibition, as models of English shyness and reserve, from ten to four without a pause—

"Which is an awkward time because
It cuts into our lunch."

When they sing, in broken faltering phrases—

Ex. 96. *Allegretto moderato*



we are neither disappointed nor puzzled to remember where we heard it before.

The Valse song of Lady Sophy, a demonstration of

a "course of maiden courtship, from the start to the triumphant matrimonial finish," with practical illustrations in gesture by the princesses, is amusingly developed by Gilbert, and the music is at least adequately tuneful. After this capital scene we are quickly brought back again into the land of reminiscence. We do not quite know what the refrain of the King's song ("First you're born") reminds us of, but it bears a resemblance to something we heard years ago at the Savoy: in the King's duet with Lady Sophy we cannot suppress a mental picture of Hilarion pleading with Princess Ida: we expect a procession of Peers in their robes, rather than First Life Guards, when we hear a new version of the fanfares from *Iolanthe*; and as for Mr. Goldbury, the company promoter, he was evidently extremely well acquainted with the tune of "If we're weak enough to tarry," from the same opera, but his memory is not really good enough to satisfy us. And so on throughout most of the act.

For all that there are a few compensations. The Finale to Act I may be disappointing, musically, but this is largely Gilbert's fault for occupying the greater part of it in introducing the Flowers of Progress to the audience, one by one. Each has to have his little song to explain what phase of England's greatness he stands for, and there is not much chance for the composer to display his constructive powers. Our old friend Captain Corcoran, from *H.M.S. Pinafore*, who comes to Utopia to teach the inhabitants how to rule the seas,

has the best luck of all of them, for he is given the opportunity of repeating his famous tag, "Well, *hardly* ever," and the chorus gives

> "three cheers and three cheers more
> For the tar who never runs his ship ashore,"

to the one tune which is allowed to be, unashamedly, its own real self. Self-quotation, as Mozart had long ago demonstrated in *Don Giovanni*, is a quite legitimate method in opera, and this was a singularly apt and happy occasion for its employment. The first-night audience, one remembers, rose to it as it rose to nothing else, and the sound of the familiar strains was the signal for an outburst of enthusiasm which drowned the singers and the orchestra, and must have been unique in the annals of the Savoy Theatre. At the end of the Finale there is a short but well built-up ensemble, which at least reminds us of the composer's old skill if it does not quite move with the same freedom as the more memorable and massive of its predecessors.

In the second act there are also some good things which stand out like little peaks on the level plain of mediocrity. It is not easy to join in the praise which some people have accorded to the commonplace, 'churchy' unaccompanied chorus, "Eagle high in cloudland soaring." Sullivan's eagle is a Mus. Doc. spreading his wings to show they are in working order. Nor is the much-admired song about the bright and beautiful English girl—in which the music, for once, is far inferior to the words—a particularly happy achievement.

On the other hand, it was a really amusing idea to make the leading tenor fail with his top notes and flourishes because he is madly in love and therefore "can't do himself justice." Both text and music of this very original song have genuine humour, whimsically expressed.

The imitation Christy Minstrel scene, at the Court of St. James's Hall, has already been alluded to. It is extremely funny, with orchestration mimicking banjos and bones and the whole paraphernalia of the nigger troupe, and contains a delicate but palpable allusion to a popular tune of the time, "Johnny get your gun." Then there is the charmingly scored "Drawing-Room" music in gavotte style, though not actually a gavotte, which takes place during the presentations at Court.

Most successful of all is a vivacious Trio for the two wise men and the Public Exploder, sung while they are hatching a plot of "superhuman subtlety" to overthrow the King and his English government. This is, indeed, the most effective number of the whole piece. The music babbles on gracefully while the three plotters whisper suggestions to each other, only the comments upon them being heard by the audience. Eventually they come to some agreement, "We won't say how, and we won't say what," and they dance off to put their nefarious plans into action, with a melody which is as good as anything of its kind in any comic opera:

Ex. 97. *Allegro con brio*

Soon after the production of *Utopia Ltd.*, *Punch*, which in those days frequently succeeded in being pertinent and a little impertinent simultaneously, came out with a rather cruel picture which nevertheless expressed in some measure the attitude of a large section of the public. Gilbert was seen drawing down handles such as one sees in a public-house bar, and pouring the mixture into a large jug—the handles were labelled with the names of his previous operas. Sullivan at the same time was seated before a heap of the scores, turning over the pages with an eager, searching expression on his face. Despite all criticisms, however, the opera achieved 245 consecutive performances—a goodly run indeed—but it has not yet been revived in this country, though it was for some time in the repertory of Williamson's Opera Company in Australia, where the present writer had the pleasure of renewing its acquaintance in 1906.

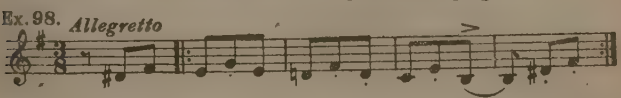
An English revival of *Utopia* would be welcome, if only to afford an opportunity of discovering whether, like *Ruddigore*, it has merits which were not fully recognized in 1893. The derivative character of much of the music must always be evident to those hearers who have a comprehensive knowledge of its predecessors, but a new generation is not always so critical of such matters, and as a skit upon late Victorian manners and customs it would have a special interest at a time when the Victorians are being so freely discussed.

When *Utopia Ltd.* had finished its course at the

Savoy, and the weak French opera which replaced it had proved a failure, Sullivan and Burnand, partners of many years before, were induced to prepare a revised and lengthened version of the old German Reed piece, *The Contrabandista* (referred to on pages 43–5). The result of their labours was re-christened *The Chieftain* and produced, as a two-act opera, on December 12, 1894. *The Chieftain* contained a good deal of attractive new music and preserved most of the best matter from the previous score, notably some of the choral numbers and a quaint song, "From rock to rock," sung by the chief comedian in the part of Peter Adolphus Grigg, a British tourist who is captured by the brigands.

Perhaps the most captivating of the new musical items was a Spanish duet, "There's no one I'm certain would know me again," with a recurring figure of accompaniment which most of us knew already in the score of Lalo's well-known *Symphonie Espagnol*:

Ex. 98. *Allegretto*



This is noteworthy as a rare instance of what seems like definite 'cribbing' on the part of a composer who could scarcely ever be accused, with justice, of such an offence.

The entertainment, as a whole, had a mild flavour of old-fashioned innocence which scarcely stood the test of revival. The libretto was poor stuff, but there was some welcome sunshine in the music which reminded one now and then of *The Gondoliers* and, from the inven-

tive standpoint, it was a fresher and more exuberant musical achievement than *Utopia Ltd.* It did not prove a popular success, however, and was only presented for ninety-six performances.

At length it was rumoured that there was to be another comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan. Meanwhile the Savoy gave hospitality to Humperdinck's beautiful opera *Hänsel and Gretel*, which had been drawing all the town to the Princess's Theatre, and there was a notable revival of *The Mikado*. In course of time the new piece was pronounced ready and it was mounted on March 7, 1896.

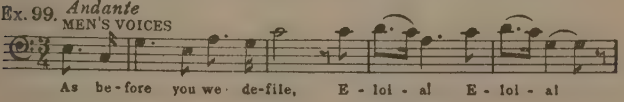
The Grand Duke, or The Statutory Duel was the last work which the two men wrote together in double harness, and truth to tell, it proved to be such a poverty-stricken affair that one would gladly draw a veil over the whole proceedings. In no respect whatever can it compare with any of their previous productions. Even *Utopia Ltd*, in its weakest pages, had at least an air of successful resuscitation. *The Grand Duke* could not possibly be galvanized into any kind of life at all, although an able company of players struggled hard to do their best for it.

It was as if Gilbert and Sullivan were trying to extract ore from an old mine that was worked out. The wealth of humour and melody, brought forth with such regularity, had once seemed inexhaustible. Now, alas, it completely failed. The plot was involved and almost unintelligible; the lyrics were mostly commonplace in

idea and clumsy in execution; the music (though it could not help having a certain facility in rhythm) seemed like the work of an utterly tired and worn-out man. It was impossible even to pretend to be interested in the doings of the dull puppets which peopled the stage. They obviously depressed Sullivan so much that only two or three times in the course of the proceedings was he able to throw out a stray hint of the old tunefulness, and the old skill.

If the quasi-Greek chorus which opens the second act could be rescued from its surroundings, and provided with new words, it would give pleasure, for it has a dignified style which is truly characteristic of the composer:

Ex. 99. *Andante*
MEN'S VOICES



The soprano solo, "Take care of him," a tiny fragment of graceful melody, and the Herald's song, proclaiming the approach of the Prince of Monte Carlo, are also a little more than a mere dim echo of past successes, though the latter is spoilt by some commonplace phrases. For the rest there cannot be the slightest chance of survival, even in the mental recollection of those who heard the work at the Savoy.

The opera was performed 123 times (it is amazing that it survived so long) and, in justice to Sullivan's memory, as well as Gilbert's, it is to be hoped that it will never be heard again.

After *The Grand Duke* Sullivan wrote a Ballet called *Victoria and Merrie England*, which was brought out at the Alhambra in the year of Diamond Jubilee, 1897, and enjoyed a fairly successful run. His name did not figure in the bill at the Savoy as the composer of a new work until May 28, 1898. This work was called *The Beauty Stone*, and the libretto was the joint effort of Pinero (who wrote the dialogue) and Comyns Carr (who was responsible for the lyrics). It was an attempt on Sullivan's part to expand his outlook—to write an opera of a romantic character which, while less heavy and elaborate than *Ivanhoe*, should have serious interest of the kind which Gilbert had always been reluctant to provide.

There is no doubt that the composer and his partners entertained high hopes of the success of their project, but in those days there was a special public at the Savoy which knew exactly what it wanted, and it was no use entertaining hopes unless you were able to entertain the audience. While making every allowance for this it is extremely unlikely that production in any other surroundings could have saved a work which was encumbered with such a dull and diffuse libretto. Whatever insight the Savoy audiences lacked, they were well trained in the appreciation of humour, and the lamentable figure of the Devil, played as a grotesquely comic personage by a popular comedian, was altogether too much for them.

The music rises high above the level of *The Grand Duke*, but nothing very ambitious is attempted. It is

almost entirely lyrical in style, and there is an air of sincerity in the writing. The choral work, however, is on rather square lines, as it is in *Ivanhoe*, and one feels, very definitely, the lack of that ready inspiration which distinguishes Sullivan's best work. The opera was played about fifty times before it was withdrawn to make way for a series of revivals of past successes.

In the following year Sullivan found a new librettist in Captain Basil Hood, a descendant of the famous Tom Hood, who was able to serve him to far better purpose than Grundy, Pinero or Comyns Carr. Captain Hood, with a wide experience in the service of musical comedy, had developed a witty and facile turn for lyric-writing of a popular kind. In providing a libretto for Sullivan he realized his chief ambition and he was certainly able to coax back a little of the composer's old vivacity in *The Rose of Persia*, which was produced at the Savoy Theatre on November 29, 1899.

The best single item in the piece is the jolly drinking song, "I care not if the cup I hold." The longer ensembles seem less inventive than usual. There is, for instance, an Octet with a great deal about the Sultan's executioner, which palpably recalls *The Mikado* (as anything to do with an executioner was perhaps bound to do), but the style has lost its former freshness, though the vocal writing is still cleverly contrived. Some of the opera unfortunately descends very definitely to the level of musical comedy, and we realize, rather sadly, that where the librettist moves on a lower plane he drags

the composer down with him. There are, it is to be feared, but a few fleeting touches of the old fancy and innate refinement in Sullivan's music to *The Rose of Persia*. He seems for the first time to be writing to please a public which the ascendancy of an inferior type of musical play had rendered less exacting and discriminating.

This was the last complete opera that Sullivan wrote. At the time of his death he was engaged upon the composition of a successor to *The Rose of Persia*, with a libretto from the same hand. The greater part of this work was sketched, and some of it was actually finished and scored. What remained to be done was entrusted to Edward German, who performed the task not merely adequately but with remarkable insight and distinction.

This composite work, entitled *The Emerald Isle, or The Caves of Carrig-Cleena*, was duly produced at the Savoy Theatre on April 27, 1901; it was received with favour and occupied the stage till the following November. Captain Hood's libretto had its points. The rustic story was well told, and the dialogue was witty. But in the lyrics his deliberate aim seems to have been to spoon-feed Sullivan with something exactly like what he had been accustomed to set in his palmy days with such success. This was a fatal mistake, because it is impossible to expect achievements of this kind to be repeated. For instance, how could Sullivan contrive a setting for

"Such a very particular
Perpendicular
Noble earl was he"

without drawing upon his memory of the Duke of Plaza Toro? And was it possible to forget what he had written years before, for Bunthorne and Grosvenor in *Patience*, with a succession of such rhymes as

"Wary fairy
Hanover Squary
Happy Pairy
Millionairy"

staring him in the face?

This kind of thing, cleverly imitative though it might be, was hopeless.

Nor did the *locale* of the opera inspire the composer as it might have been expected to do. Although Sullivan was, in reality, half Irish, he seldom wrote music of a Celtic character, and the Irish music in this work is scarcely as much as half the real thing. There is plenty of what may be considered the equivalent of the old-time Boucicault stage-Irish in music. But the genuine national mood—the mood of laughter akin to tears, which is such a touching quality of Stanford's art—is never instinctively felt. In one place at the end of the first act, it is true, there is a fleeting touch of the real thing, with a hint of the old poetry which dwelt in *Iolanthe*. This is the beautiful setting of the words " 'Come away,' sighs the Fairy voice."

If for nothing else, Sullivan's share in *The Emerald Isle* deserves to be remembered with gratitude for this really sincere and lovable moment.

CHAPTER IX

SULLIVAN AND THE ORCHESTRA

To complete the chronological consideration of Sullivan's operatic works with a chapter dealing with the failing fortunes of the theatre he helped to build, and the gradual decline of his powers as a composer, has been a distasteful task. It is all the more gratifying therefore that the time has come to return to the inspection of some of the operas of his primest years in order to discuss one very prominent feature of their constructive excellence which has not yet been fully dealt with —either in this book or elsewhere. That is, the orchestration.

Owing to the fact that the full scores are unavailable,[1] people are obliged to form their estimate of the music from the published vocal-scores with the accompaniments transcribed for the piano. These are not ill adapted for the practical purpose of rehearsing, but they are often rather clumsily arranged, and give an incomplete idea of the composer's original conceptions. They were, in all probability, made from Sullivan's rough

[1] The only opera of the series of which a full score is readily accessible is *The Mikado*; it was lithographed in Germany, and there is a copy in the library of the British Museum.

sketches before the score was completed, and therefore omit many points of vital interest to the student. Why are the full scores not published and on sale? What is the meaning of the strange policy of secrecy which has never been adopted in the case of any other important composer in modern times? It seems incredible that the British people should be denied access to the work of one of their greatest musicians in its only proper and authentic form. It is more incredible still that it is impossible to hire a manuscript full score for the purpose of conducting a performance, and that even the musical director during the London season is obliged to be content with a 'cued-in' piano copy on his desk. This is a state of things that no self-respecting conductor can view with equanimity, but he has no choice in the matter, for the owners of the performing rights have decreed that he shall never be allowed to do his job as thoroughly as he would wish to do it.

As things are it is not surprising that people who only know Sullivan from what can be bought on paper have a very imperfect knowledge of his gifts: it is only those who have heard the operas several times properly presented who can realize how much there is in them that is worthy of study and admiration. Even at the performances of the professional companies, except in London and other big centres, the complete scoring is seldom heard, and the numerous amateur productions, though they have familiarized the public with the operas in some kind of a way, and thus served a useful

purpose, are very rarely efficiently equipped in the orchestral department. There is something intensely regrettable, and almost ironical, in the fact that Sullivan, who is acknowledged to be one of the greatest masters of instrumentation amongst British composers, should have been destined to be so continuously ill-served in this important respect.

Inadequate representation is, of course, the inevitable penalty of popularity. It is not too much to say that many who thought they knew the operas by heart felt that they were hearing the music of Sullivan for the first time when they listened to the recent performances (in 1926) under Dr. Malcolm Sargent at the Prince's Theatre. It is amusing to note, too, that this admirable conductor was actually accused, in some quarters, of adding to Sullivan's scores, because (through a diligent study of the original manuscripts which he insisted on consulting) he was able to correct errors, remove accretions, and bring to light points which were entirely unfamiliar, even to the life-long devotees! If the powers that be will only allow these scores to be printed and circulated in the ordinary way, nobody will be able to make accusations of this kind again without proper foundation, and thousands will be able to appreciate at its full value the work of a man who has the ability to give us an inspiring performance of what Sullivan really wrote.

Many composers of works in which an orchestra is employed, write their music first, on two staves

for piano, and afterwards score it. This was not Sullivan's method. The scoring as a rule was, as it should be, the mainspring of his musical thought. He thought directly in the terms of the orchestra. We know that it was his habit to sketch out rhythms first of all, and then evolve his melodies from these. The melodies alone, with perhaps the barest outlines of the accompaniments, and the chorus parts, were supplied to the singers for study. He then attended the rehearsals and virtually extemporized or 'vamped' the accompaniments himself, learning from the stage action exactly how many bars were required for the symphonies and interludes. But all the time the actual fabric of the composition was evolving itself in his brain, only to be definitely expressed when he set to work on the final orchestral score.

Of Sullivan's rapidity of working there are many stories—some of which are ridiculous. The most absurd story is the oft-recorded one of his sitting up all night to complete the orchestration of one of his operas on the eve of its production, with two copyists in an adjoining room taking the score from him sheet by sheet. At about seven in the morning, the story goes, he was in despair. There was *no time to score*. There was but one alternative—to orchestrate the remaining numbers *straight into the parts*. "This he did, and at 11 a.m. all was finished, and at 12 the piece rehearsed." A pretty story for unmusical people to marvel over, but it is spoilt by the obvious truth that with copyists in

attendance (even though they might have been sleepy) the writing of the music into score and the copying by others (or even by himself) into the parts would have been a far quicker process !

There is, however, no doubt at all that Sullivan, when once he got going, was an amazingly rapid worker, and that many of his best efforts were composed when pressed for time. The overture to *Iolanthe* was written in a single night, and that to *The Yeomen of the Guard* scored in the course of twelve hours—and these are the best of all his comic-opera overtures.

It is indeed surprising, considering the speed at which Sullivan wrote, that his works contain so few examples of slip-shod or ill-considered workmanship. He used all sorts of abbreviations to save time (which make his manuscripts puzzling to decipher, though his handwriting is very clear) but no details were scamped, and we constantly find him going out of his way to invent elaborations of detail which add interest to his work for those who care to listen to it with a musician's ears. At the same time there is never any loss of clearness as regards the main issues. In many respects Sullivan's orchestral writing (though so different in style) reminds one of the work of our greatest master of orchestration at the present day—Gustav Holst. It is orchestral or nothing—its meaning belongs inseparably to the instruments which express it. There is no fumbling or groping, and no playing with second thoughts. It goes straight from the mind to the paper.

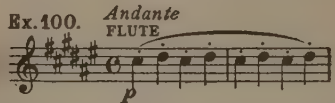
Sullivan's comic operas are all scored for nothing more pretentious than the ordinary theatre orchestra, consisting of two flutes, one oboe, two clarinets, two bassoons (sometimes one suffices), two horns, two cornets, two trombones, percussion and strings. It is a pity that he wrote for cornets instead of trumpets, but that was the custom in light opera in those days, and even in the symphony orchestra at the Crystal Palace the players used cornets in place of the far finer instruments for which all the great composers wrote. Whilst in his most mature operas Sullivan used his cornets in a dignified way, after the manner of trumpets, in *The Pirates of Penzance*, and even in a work as late as *Patience* we find cornet tunes, of the military-band type, in the overtures.

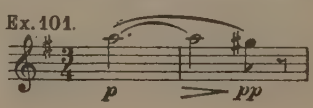
The chief characteristics of Sullivan's orchestration may be summed up in three words—clarity, picturesqueness and refinement. He was not primarily a brilliant orchestrator, though in *The Mikado*, and to a lesser degree in *The Gondoliers*, he achieves now and then a glitter which is more characteristic of France than of England. His usual models were Mozart and Mendelssohn, but there are occasional traces of the influence of Gounod, and even of Berlioz.

The only miscalculations shown in his treatment of the limited instrumental forces he had at his command are to be found in the rapid string passages such as we find in the overtures of *The Mikado* and *The Yeomen of the Guard*. These seem to cry out for a larger mass of

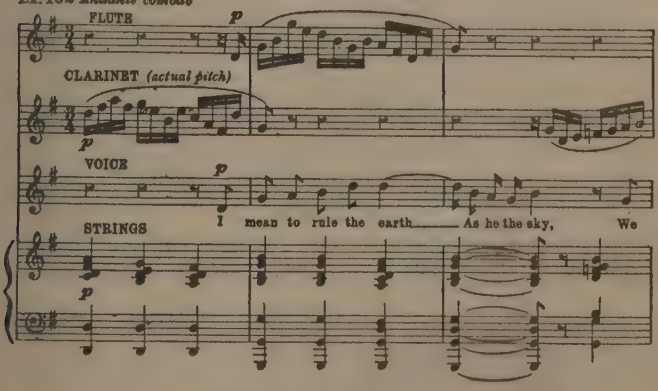
strings than is available in an ordinary theatre, and are apt to sound weak rather than bright when played by only a few instruments. Almost everywhere else he is thinking definitely within his prescribed medium, and not attempting to do more than its limitations allow.

Sullivan's felicitous use of the wood-wind in solo passages, and to give added colour to the voice lines, has often been noticed and extolled. Instances of this happy skill are too numerous to chronicle, but his admirers will readily call to mind the lovely employment of the flute with muted strings in the duet for Casilda and Luiz in *The Gondoliers* ("There was a time") where the middle notes of the wind-instrument, moving to and fro from C sharp to D sharp, give a peculiar tone of wistfulness to the accompaniment:

Ex. 100.

Then there is the elaborate flute solo which precedes Mad Margaret's recitative in *Ruddigore*, and the delicate use of two flutes in thirds at the words "Flutter little heart" in Pitti-Sing's little solo at the beginning of Act II of *The Mikado*. In the latter opera an even more subtle touch is the held oboe note over the seventh and eighth bars of "The Sun whose rays,"

Ex. 101.

the effect of which may be recalled if reference is made to the piano score at this point. The graceful answering phrases of flute and clarinet in the second verse of the same song are also charmingly imagined; they form one of Sullivan's most masterly touches, and deserve a more complete quotation than space will allow:

Ex. 102 *Andante comodo*



As for the much-abused bassoon, no comic-opera composer can be expected to eschew its aid when enforcing humorous points. But let it be noticed how seldom Sullivan allows it to be a mere clown of the orchestra, or uses it in otherwise than a refined and sensitive way. Except, perhaps, in *The Sorcerer*, he indulges in no clumsy fooling in his writing for an instrument which he obviously regards with affection. He far more frequently calls upon his bassoon player to accentuate the tenderness of the music than to raise a cheap laugh.

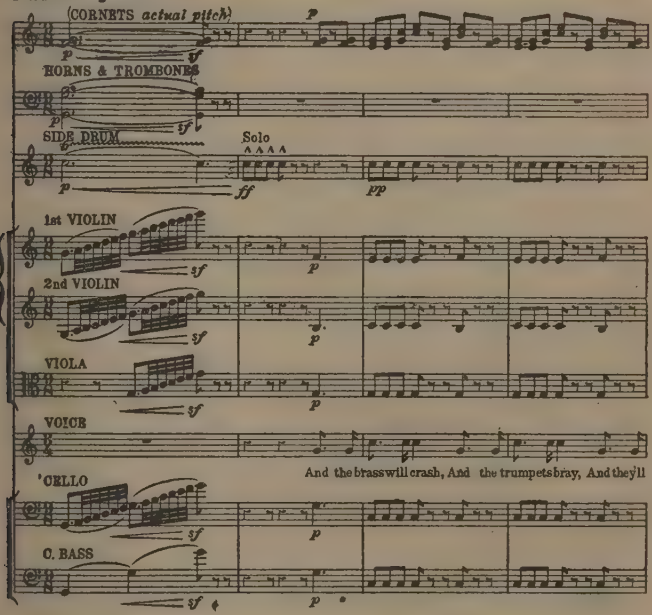
In the same way the restraint and economy exercised in the employment of percussion instruments is remarkable. Over-use of the triangle spells triviality, and excessively frequent bangings of big drum and cymbals inevitably make for vulgarity. Sullivan will have none of these things. He is far more fond of the soft tones of the cymbals, for instance, than the loud clashings which are dear to the hearts of some audiences. Can we not recall the telling effect of the gentle cymbal notes in Dame Carruthers's song, at the words "The screw may twist and the rack may turn"?

One of the most effective passages ever written for the side-drum (or military-drum) enlivens the Trio "Young man despair, likewise go to" in *The Mikado*. To save space the wood-wind parts in the first bar of the extract following are omitted. It should be mentioned that the scale on the second beat of this bar is reinforced by the piccolo, which plays an octave higher than the first violins. The cornet parts, here given in the actual pitch sounded, are tremendously effective, but so soft that they do not drown the voice. One should note the effect of the side-drum playing quite alone at the climax of the *crescendo*, and the sudden drop to *piano* for the rhythmical accompaniment of cornets and strings.

A specially noticeable feature in Sullivan's scoring is his great fondness for the *pizzicato* of the strings. It is easy to remember such things as the introduction to Phœbe's first song in *The Yeomen* with its crisp chords, and the charming effects gained in this way in Gianetta's

song, "Kind sir, you cannot have the heart," in *The Gondoliers*. The imitation of the banjos in *Utopia Ltd.* is another instance of a lighter kind. But the best example of all is the glittering accompaniment of Pish-

Ex. 108 *Allegro moderato*

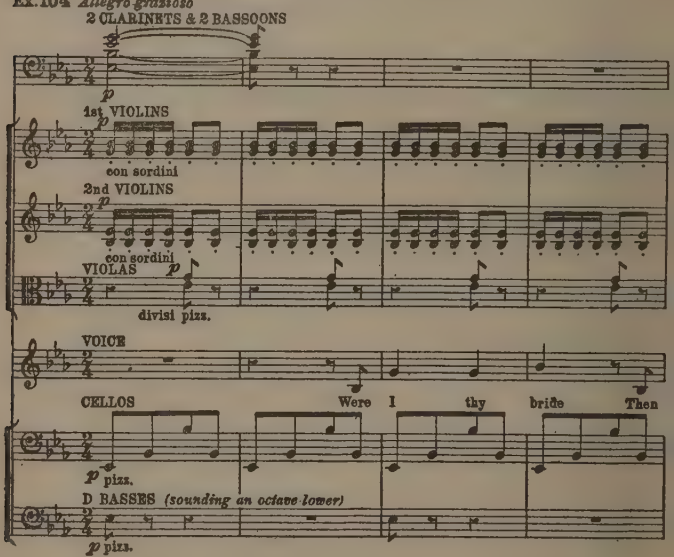


Tush's song ("Our great Mikado, virtuous man"). Here the strings are definitely divided into no less than seven parts, *pizzicato*, and this division is continued almost throughout. The effect is extremely bright, in a way that no simpler method could have been. This,

at all events, was not careless or perfunctory scoring, however quickly he may have managed to put it on paper, but most carefully thought out.

Cecil Forsyth in his treatise on Orchestration,[1] singles out the solo "Were I thy bride," in *The Yeomen* as an exquisite miniature in scoring, and so it is. The '*divisi*' muted violins in conjunction with the 'cello *pizzicato*, helped on the off-beats by the viola notes, together produce a most delicate effect:

Ex. 104 *Allegro grazioso*



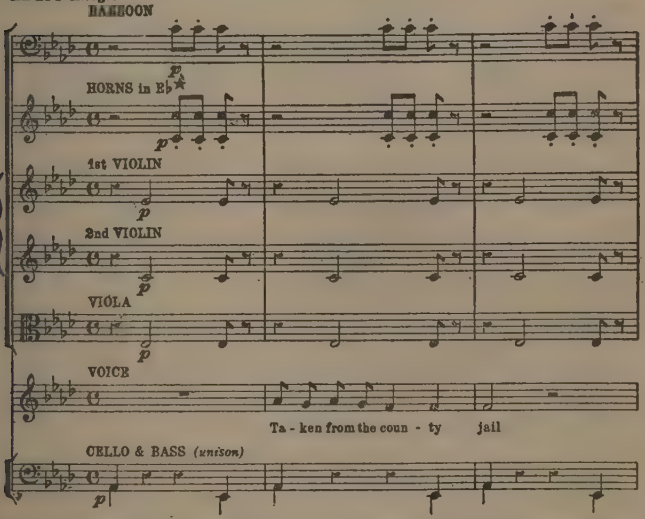
Forsyth counsels the student to compare the sound of

[1] *Orchestration*, Cecil Forsyth. Macmillan & Co.

this opening as played on the piano with the sound which the orchestra produces, and to consider "not only the notes which Sullivan has written, but the many other notes he might have written and didn't."

Sullivan's control of the balance of strings and wind in accompanying solo voices is singularly perfect. In this connection it is interesting, again, to observe how a new light is thrown upon what appears in the piano version as a quite ordinary accompaniment of repeated notes, by a device whereby the strings and the wind have different pulsations in conjunction.

Ex 105 *Allegro*



* Horns in E flat sound a major sixth lower than the written notes. The octaves in this Horn part are therefore E flats throughout.

This will be recognized as the opening of Ko-Ko's first little solo after his entrance, and is as cunning a piece of ingenuity in simple colour-device as can be found in any of the operas.

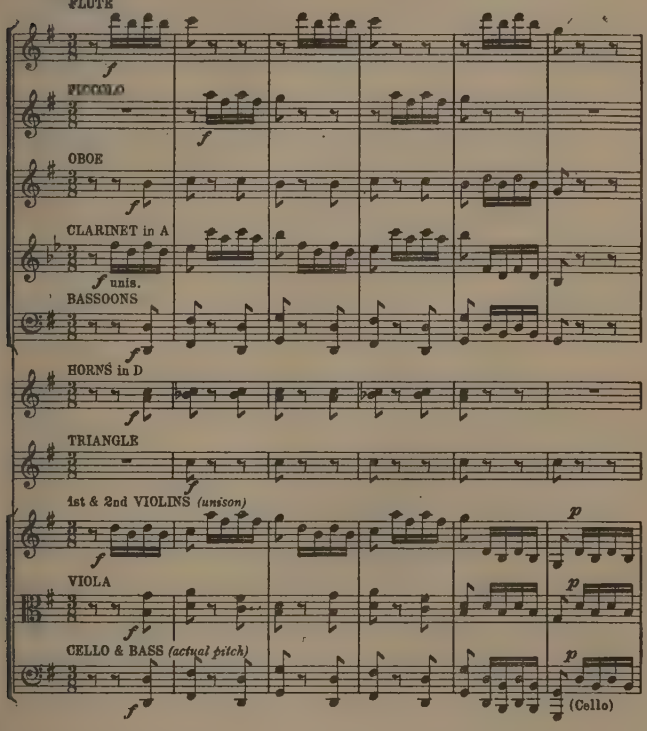
As an example of Sullivan's clear, straightforward orchestral treatment of a vivacious rhythm the brief extract opposite is deserving of close inspection. It is the opening of the duet for Point and Shadbolt in the second act of *The Yeomen of the Guard*. To those who are unaccustomed to score-reading, it should be pointed out that the Piccolo sounds an octave higher than the written notes, the Clarinets in A transpose a minor third lower (sounding in the key of G instead of the key of B flat), and the Horns in D play a minor seventh lower, so that the actual chords heard here are D and B alternating with D and C.

The balance of string and wind tone is contrived as perfectly as it could be, and, as in the previous extract from the same opera, not a note is wasted or misplaced.

Lastly, some attention should be paid to the many examples these operas afford of humorous musical illustration of isolated verbal points. Apart from the setting of the Lord Chancellor's nightmare song in *Iolanthe*, which bristles with grotesque allusions, the most striking witticisms of this kind are to be found in the score of *The Mikado*. Everybody will remember Gilbert's allusion to the 'Monday Pops' in the Mikado's song,

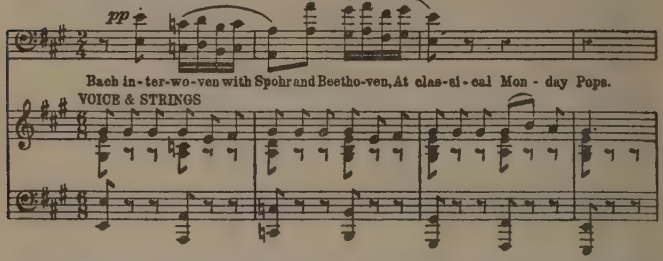
but some may not be able to recall exactly how Sullivan has illustrated the line with a clever allusion to a

Ex 106 *Allegro vivace*

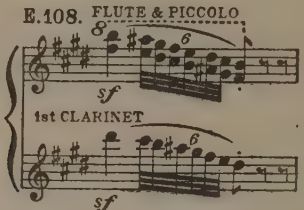


familiar Bach theme. This is a condensed version of the actual passage:

Ex 107 *Allegro vivace*
(CLARINET & BASSOON *actual pitch*)



And what could be more diverting than the very realistic "shriek that shrieked he," which emerges from the orchestra during Ko-Ko's narrative of the execution, in this wise:

E.108. FLUTE & PICCOLO

The above notation shows the actual sounds produced. The piccolo and flute, at this altitude, have a biting shrillness which no other instruments can suggest, and the clarinet in its upper register is able to emit a peculiarly piercing tone, but it is the rapid downward scale which imparts the needed realism.

Sullivan's orchestration is of the kind which suffers terribly from rough or insufficiently rehearsed performance, and unfortunately it is frequently subjected to a

treatment which is far from tender. The tight hand which the authorities maintain over the manner of the stage presentation of the operas seems to be unaccountably relaxed when it comes to the equally important doings of the performers who occupy seats on the other side of the footlights.

The fact that the 'traditions' of these works have been jealously guarded ever since they were first put upon the stage has already been commented upon. Not only are 'gags' of any kind expressly, and very wisely, forbidden, but an edict is issued with every permission given to amateurs who wish to perform the operas disallowing any 'cuts.' So far so good. But singers, conductors and orchestral players are left a pretty free hand, and are sometimes inclined to abuse the trust. Some grievous customs have arisen, even in the performances of the leading professional companies, which tend to spoil the representations on the musical side. The vexed question of encores is not easily solved, but the habit of taking certain numbers *doppio movimento* when they are repeated might certainly be discountenanced. Nothing could be more lamentably inartistic than the effect produced by the Grand Inquisitor's song, "There lived a King," or that most delicate and beautiful patter-trio in *Ruddigore*, when given at twice the intended pace. Such things were never done during the composer's lifetime.

Sullivan's music, and especially the orchestration of it, is so perfectly poised that it is a cruel shame to

encourage its destruction in this manner by setting a bad example in the performances which are supposed to be authoritative. The instruments of Sullivan's orchestra are as important to the just interpretation of his ideas as Gilbert's characters are to the proper presentation of his dramatic imaginings, and the music is entitled to at least as much respect as the libretto. It is to be feared, however, that the composer has been less zealously served than his colleague by those whose avowed aim it is to preserve a decent standard of public performance in these famous works. It is up to them to justify their methods of control in both essentials of operatic production, by extending to the composer the same measure of protection that they grant to the author.

CHAPTER X

RECOGNITION

Opinions differ as to the functions of musical criticism and the manner in which these functions may best be exercised. Such an intangible art as music is susceptible of so many interpretations and varies so greatly in its appeal to different temperaments that it is rare indeed to find two individuals who will agree in their valuation even of the universally acknowledged masterpieces.

Music, as Schumann said, encourages the nightingales to sing and provokes the lap-dogs to bark. In general it may be averred, however, that the more musical the critic is the more appreciative his criticism will be. The estimates of a man of appreciative inclinations may err on the side of generosity, but they will possess a higher value as evidence of the stimulating power of the art he is endeavouring to serve than the captious utterances of a less susceptible man who is anxious to saddle the composer with the responsibility for his own receptive deficiencies. Nevertheless, the entirely uncritical writer on music is seldom a stimulating force. It is indeed impossible for anyone with a sense of historical perspective to sit in judgment upon the work of any

composer without tempering his praise with blame when that composer's work falls below its own best level.

A critic's difficulties are increased, not lessened, when he has to deal with what is familiar. The critic of new things dons the mantle of a prophet. He can speak with an air of authority, for what he says is not likely to be disproved until long after it is forgotten. The critic of established things, on the other hand, has a more severe task. He cannot speak without fear of contradiction. He must know his facts. It is futile, when looking backward, to dwell upon what might have been in the face of what is. In reviewing work which has stood the test of time—which has survived when much that was contemporaneously thought finer has been forgotten—he must account for this phenomenon and find reasons, if he can, for the survival of the one and the disappearance of the other.

All these difficulties confront the present writer in his effort to form a just estimate of Arthur Sullivan's achievements as a whole, and to assign him a definite place in English musical history. But first of all it may be well to dispose of the irritating attitude adopted by some that Sullivan might have done more with his gifts than he did. Is there any composer of whom this cannot be said? Bach perhaps, or Brahms—but who else? We do not judge a man's output by contrasting what he has done with what we think he ought to have done. Still less should we confuse the limitations of the musician's public with those of the musician himself.

Sullivan was, quite frankly, a tantalizing mixture of talent and genius. His talent has dated : his genius is for all time. His talent concerned itself with the making of serious music, an occupation in which—as a leader in his profession—he was naturally anxious to prove his efficiency : his genius took wing and lightly skimmed on the surface of the waters into which his talent plunged. In serious music-making, despite skill and sincerity, he was not strong enough to break away from the fashions of a peculiarly narrow age in our English art—the age of cumbersome oratorios, sugary anthems and hymns, and a species of domestic music which hovered between flowery elegance and insipid pathos.

Even the comic operas, which are the fruits of his genius, did not wholly emancipate themselves from the sentimentalities which so many people, in those days, craved for; but in spite of occasional lapses they most assuredly possess the spark of independent life, a spark kindled anew every time they are performed.

One thing is clear. We shall not determine the true importance of Sullivan until we make up our minds to disregard his serious work altogether. It may still have charms for a few straggling admirers, it may even have some faint interest for others who wish to study his technical methods, but it belongs irrecoverably to the past. His comic operas alone belong to the present and the future.

England has never had a greater need for the type of music which Sullivan provided in these works than she

has to-day, and it seems that Sullivan himself must supply it, for he has (more's the pity) no counterpart amongst present-day writers. The level of accomplishment in serious British music nowadays is admittedly high, but the musical atmosphere is heavily charged with oppressiveness. This is, no doubt, an age of high hope and hard attempting, but there is far too little sunshine and far too much misty obscurity. Many of our most accomplished composers are so deeply engaged in developing their pet theories of what English music ought to be that their work is a sealed book to all but those who are merely interested in music and eager to discuss it, as opposed to those who wish to hear it for the refreshment of the spirit. Year after year this self-conscious blend of music and metaphysics is served out to us—the 'mixture as before'—and, while our smart and learned critics find plenty to write about, and cudgel their brains over, the mere music-lover who comes to listen is puzzled, and goes empty away.

He feels like a man who has come to view a wonderful landscape. He has been told of its beauties but finds them enshrouded in clouds. So with our music-lover. He longs to bask in the sunshine, to listen with an untroubled sense of recognition and responsiveness. Instead of this being possible, he is repulsed with too much cold intellectuality, too much restraint, too much introspection, too much palpable evasion of what is frank, natural or romantic.

Some composers are busy trying to prove that everything which has been thought ugly in music in the past has possibilities of beauty in the future. Others are harking back to a more primitive era and professing to find inspiration in the methods of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which they idly believe can be grafted on to the musical thought of centuries later. Yet another group (perhaps even more prominent than the preceding) is rejoicing in the distortion and wilful intellectualization of folk-song.

Such experiments are intensely interesting, of course, but do they lead anywhere? Are they not what Disraeli would have called the mere "frigid theories of a generalizing age"? How we can allow our music to be regulated by such artificial obsessions as these, when so many people are starving for artistic enjoyment, it is impossible to conjecture.

This is not intended to be a general indictment of modern English music. Far from it. There are plenty of composers labouring in the highest spheres of serious music in England who are capable of providing us with sincere work which is modern in spirit without being theory-ridden. And even some of the ultra-intellectuals, on those happy occasions when they forget to think so hard, and throw their wretched theories to the winds, are able to write delectable music—for they are, many of them, true musicians at heart. But the publicity accorded to crabbed faddism is now so great that the less advertised efforts of those who are

following their natural bent and producing clear underivative work are apt to pass almost unrecognized.

While serious musical art in England is thus suffering from the incubus of intellectualism, light music is in a truly parlous state. Our one really distinguished writer in this *genre*, Edward German, has apparently almost ceased from composing altogether, which is perhaps hardly to be wondered at, for he has been shamefully ignored in artistic circles. When Sullivan died it was believed by many that German would be his legitimate successor in the same type of work. This belief was not quite justified. In some respects he is a maturer writer than Sullivan—his style has more dash, perhaps, and his orchestration is certainly more modern and more brilliant. But in comic-opera writing he is not able to show anything like the variety of expression, the humour, or the originality of Sullivan. He is at his best in the sphere of purely instrumental composition, which unfortunately he deserted in order to write for the stage. Such works as his *Suite in D Minor* (Leeds Festival, 1895) and his *Welsh Rhapsody* (Cardiff Festival, 1904), remain supreme in their own way, and show a mastery and resourcefulness to which Sullivan never quite attained.

Edward German's creative talent certainly deserves the official acknowledgment which both our universities and our state authorities have so far failed to grant.[1] If he has failed to keep the torch of English comic opera

[1] The list of New Year's Honours (1928) happily accords the State recognition, so long over-due.

burning, he has at least striven more than anybody else, since Sullivan, to maintain an artistic level in this department of art, and when the curtain fell on the last of his Savoy operas we, as a nation, lost all hope of maintaining our supremacy in this class of work. The only light operas comparable with those of Sullivan or German to be performed in London of recent years have been the work of a Frenchman—André Messager.

At the present time our theatres are content, apparently, to import trash from America or dullness from Vienna or, alternatively, to employ native writers, who are frankly purveyors rather than artists, to stir the jazz-pot and ladle out the poisonous fluid in a tepid state to more or less apathetic audiences. Little wonder then that the musical theatre-going public has redoubled its enthusiasm towards Sullivan, and that an equally appreciative new generation has joined in the chorus of praise from the host of middle-aged and elderly admirers, who retain their affection for what they have known and loved so long.

There is no question that the musical predilections of the average Englishman, young or old, are for works which breathe the spirit of comedy. And why not? The English are a reticent and undemonstrative race, but they are not devoid of feeling, and certainly not lacking in a sense of fun. No less keen an observer than Dame Ethel Smyth has declared that we are a supremely humorous people, and that since Elizabethan times "the most living stage literature we have produced, travelling from the Restoration drama, through Sheridan

to Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, is in the realm of comedy."

If we turn to music we shall also discover that the best we have to show is that which is most truly expressive of the national temperament. Where is our most characteristically British musical expression to be found? Not in oratorio (despite Elgar's isolated masterpieces, and the excellence of our choral singing) for this, in the main, is a mere survival, a tradition handed down from the days of Handel, who was not an Englishman. Not, certainly, in symphony or concerto. No. It is to be found, on the thoughtful and intellectual side, in instrumental chamber-music and a delicate type of solo song and, on a more popular plane, in comic opera. The capable British writers of chamber-music and song to-day are legion, but real comic opera, though here and there enriched by some occasional or fitful examples by other composers (such as Ethel Smyth's *The Bosun's Mate*, Gatty's *Prince Ferelon* or Martin Shaw's *Mr. Pepys*) rests its claim to national importance almost entirely on the work of one man—Arthur Sullivan.

If this study of the comic operas of Sullivan is to justify its existence it must testify that they were a supreme manifestation of a national art-form which, while fulfilling perfectly the demands of its own age, yet remains to-day as a living representation of an epoch which is behind us. As Christina Rossetti says,

> "All things that pass
> Are Wisdom's looking-glass."

But to pass is not necessarily to die. These operas are like magic mirrors into which we can all gaze and see the foibles of our fathers and grandfathers reflected with gentle satire and fluent musical grace for the amusement and joy of generations to come.

There has been no need to minimize the crudities and banalities which disfigure so many pages of Sullivan's work, or to shut one's eyes to his very obvious limitations. It has been freely admitted that he was not really a dramatic composer, although all his most successful works were operas. His methods of writing were not in advance of his time; on the contrary they were a little behind it. His style underwent but slight development in the course of his career. *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers* are more surely controlled by technical skill than *Trial by Jury* or *Pinafore*, it is true, but his later music is not materially different in character from the music of his youth. His harmonic invention, too, was lacking in enterprise and never more than sufficient for the matter in hand.

No fair-minded appreciation of Sullivan need seek to disregard such shortcomings, or neglect to point out passages in his works which are momentarily trivial, inadequate or unoriginal. G. K. Chesterton it was who said, tersely and wisely, "you never discover who is an inspired poet till the inspiration goes": there are plenty of opportunities of discovering that Sullivan is an inspired musician by a similar circumstance. But, unlike so many of his contemporaries, he never 'manu-

factured' music. If a lyric or a situation appealed to him his setting had the inevitable charm and fitness that obviously came to him in a flash: if not he apparently took little trouble and, choosing the line of least resistance, just set the words simply in a trite and commonplace way. This accounts for the fact that while there is plenty of poor music to be found in his operas (some of it very poor indeed), there is practically nothing that is laboured or strained. He was always quick to see where the words were all that mattered, and when such was the case he deliberately gave them the most elementary and obvious setting—perhaps because he did not want to waste his energies.

Sullivan certainly believed in economy of effort. Dame Ethel Smyth has recorded (in her "Impressions that Remained") that when, on one occasion, she showed him some of her work in which he thought there was too great a prodigality of ideas, he said, "An artist has got to make a shillingsworth of goods out of a penn'orth of material, and here you go chucking away sovereigns for nothing"—which is, as Dame Ethel says, a sound statement on Art.

Sullivan's music is so entirely devoid of pretentiousness that many people, while recognizing its individuality, have failed to perceive the very marked quality of its style. Style in music, as in literature, does not consist of a studied display of skill or the exploitation of rare artificialities. On the contrary, the real secret of style, as Matthew Arnold declared (and he surely

knew a good deal about it), is "to have something to say and to say it as clearly as you can." In this sense Sullivan was a greater stylist than any of his more serious contemporaries. Even those amongst them who counted for most, progressively, were all—one realizes it on looking back as one did not at the time—a little too conscious of their art. The responsibility of living in an age of complex music seemed to sit rather heavily upon them. They did not dare to take things too easily, for the elaborate achievements of the continental giants were a challenge that could not be ignored. Coming after a spell of inefficiency and dullness in English music they probably felt it was their mission to do things thoroughly, and to strive to keep their music alert and moving. This resulted in improved technique plus a great deal of what now seems mere fussy energy. Hundreds of pages of Parry's music, for instance (eager, characteristic and high-minded as it undoubtedly was) suffered from this restless disease.

Sullivan, on the other hand, at least knew the value of repose. He appeared to care nothing for art as such; he did not bother to acquire the newer technique upon which the serious men set such store; he was content to give forth what was in him simply, gladly and with straightforward efficiency. He glanced at the complexities of music, no doubt, but passed them by on the other side, and went his way unconcerned. His easy aptitude had its dangers. He formulated definite ways of doing certain things, and did them in the same ways

over and over again. Occasionally, too, as we have seen, he stumbled into vulgarity. But his energy was never spurious or simulated; it was always innately boyish and high-spirited. In his quieter moments he was hardly ever dull.

In a word Sullivan called upon his listeners to enjoy what he had to say, not to admire it. This faculty of thinking with his audiences rather than for them was, indeed, what chiefly endeared him to the world. The very greatest composers, perhaps, are priests of the public, the lesser composers are its servants. Sullivan was not quite in either class. He was rather the companion of the public.

Of the positive qualities of Sullivan's services to art a good deal has been said in the course of this book, but the subject is not exhausted. Perhaps the most important of these services arose, as Cecil Forsyth says, from "his recognition of the fact that it was not only necessary to set his text to music which was pleasing in itself, but to invent melodies in such close alliance with the words that the two things became (to the hearer) indistinguishable." "In this respect," the tribute continues, "Sullivan did more for the English stage than any musician of his time."

Opinions may differ as to the musical adequacy of the performances of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas which were given at the Savoy Theatre, and as to the talents of the well-known performers whose names were so closely identified with these works. But at least the

members of the company all learnt one lesson thoroughly —the necessity for clarity of diction in song as well as in speech—and, fortunately, this wholesome tradition still prevails in the performances of the D'Oyly Carte organization to-day.

If Mr. Rutland Boughton, and others who are striving for the establishment of serious opera in England, would but hearken to Sullivan and his interpreters they would learn something which would remove the first stumbling-block to the progress of their schemes. As things stand at present, comic opera is the opera which English people go to to enjoy; grand opera is the opera they go to if they want to be mystified. More human beings prefer enjoyment to mystification, and so comic opera thrives whilst its more ambitious cousin languishes.

The composer is more often to blame than the singer for the lamentable defections which make our opera so unintelligible. As Forsyth points out, the natural interaction of word-phrase and music-phrase is the whole problem of operatic composition—without it opera cannot exist, "except in the state in which it exists here, as an unpleasant foreign hireling." In this respect the consummate art of Sullivan, in creating English music which was absolutely at one with an English text, leads the way, and must in due course exercise its influence. His achievement was, indeed, more considerable than might at first be supposed, for Gilbert cannot always have been an inspiring factor. There is no doubt that Sullivan was frequently hampered, and sometimes

almost repulsed, by the unloveliness of the lyrics which were supplied to him. Yet how often do we not find that the music contrives to be charming even when the verses are ungainly, and that the situation is saved by a dignified poetical setting of a prosaic or trivial idea.

If Sullivan's artistry in word-setting has first claim to importance amongst his positive qualities, we may attach an almost equal value to his genius for the abounding provision of good melodies. He was undoubtedly a great maker of English tunes—of what we can justly call folk-tunes and folk-songs. Let us disabuse ourselves of the idea that a folk-song is a song written by nobody and arranged by Cecil Sharp. It is true that the composers of many of our famous national melodies were born to blush unseen, and that Cecil Sharp and his kin have prevented them from wasting their sweetness on the desert air. But is Sullivan any the less an inventor of folk-songs because it happened that he was an accomplished musician and chose to harmonize and arrange them himself? It has been said that one of the noblest tasks of the musician is to take from his own people the living seed, and, after tending, to render it back—a perfect flower—to the giver. Sullivan's tunes are folk-tunes in precisely this sense, and as such it is probable that they will live for centuries.

Perhaps when Macaulay's hypothetical New Zealander is surveying the ruins of St. Paul's from the broken arch of London Bridge he will be whistling the

"Regular Royal Queen," or "Prithee, pretty maiden," without in the least knowing, or caring, who wrote them!

Again, Sullivan's sense of humour was remarkable inasmuch as it seemed almost invariably co-existent with a sense of beauty. Whilst Gilbert's humour was, not seldom, a little ugly in theme (he was, in particular, very fond of making fun of female unattractiveness and corpulency), Sullivan had the knack of divesting a distasteful idea of its offensiveness and crudity. Lady Jane's song in *Patience* is, of course, an outstanding instance of this, but there are others which might be cited. Often, as we have seen, the humour is entirely in the music, showing that the composer was alive to humorous possibilities which did not exist in the mind of his librettist.

After long association with Gilbert his attitude towards music became so definitely that of a humorist that he found it increasingly difficult to deal with serious things without a suspicion of a twinkle in his eye. He confessed, on one occasion, that when he was writing *The Golden Legend* he found it difficult to get away from the comic-opera attitude. He invested Lucifer in that cantata with a 'contrapuntal limp' which was almost comic, and furthermore when Elsie, at the most impressive moment of the story, sings, "I come not here to argue but to die," he felt quite sorry that he was unable to allow the chorus to respond "She doesn't come here to argue but to die," in true Savoy fashion.

But do not let us deplore these things. A comic genius is a rarity—the combination of two comic geniuses in almost perfect accord, the one the complement of the other, is probably unique.

There may even be some significance in the fact that the only English music of the latter half of the nineteenth century which seems absolutely certain to survive is wedded to literature which is not far removed from nonsense. The value of such witty nonsense as that which Gilbert provided and Sullivan embellished so brilliantly lies partly in its realization of the everlasting appeal of honest healthy laughter. Works of true humour do not fade as readily as works of a serious romantic trend. It may seem a paradox that our delight in what appears to be ephemeral is more easily re-experienced by those who come after us than the feelings which stir our deeper sensibilities. But the fact remains that it is always easier to laugh with a past generation than to weep with it. Seriousness has a way of growing old-fashioned, whilst the absurdities of an epoch, which have nothing to do with its progress (but form, as often as not, a mere commentary upon it) have a permanence denied to many of its more solemn endeavours.

Finally, let us dismiss from our minds the insidious fallacy that because a composer is popular he is unimportant. If we come to the conclusion that Sullivan is the most permanent English composer of the later nineteenth century (and it is difficult to avoid doing so, whether we like it or not) let us recognize

that it is largely because of his popularity and not in spite of it.

Popularity is not primarily a question of goodness or badness. Rossini said that there were only two kinds of music, good and bad. If we were to subdivide the music forming these two classes, into that which is popular and that which is not, we should find a considerable amount of popular music in each class. It is more to the point to make a distinction between the popularity which speedily dies and the popularity which survives —the lesser popularity which depends upon tricks, fashions and vain repetitions, and the higher popularity which results from the creation of something so universal and urgent that its appeal is ever renewable. There can be no hesitation in deciding into which of these categories the comic operas of Sullivan rightly fall.

It is doubtful if any British works of art are so intimately known to so many hundreds of thousands of people as these, or so completely assimilated in every detail. To sit in the gallery at the Prince's Theatre (or, for that matter, in the gallery of any theatre in the suburbs or the provinces) during the Gilbert and Sullivan season is a wonderful experience. One realizes that one is in the midst of an audience which has assembled to take part in an established rite rather than merely to enjoy a performance. Every tradition is familiar, and the slightest defection from the approved rendering is noted and commented upon. It is remarkable to observe, too, that this intimate knowledge, this exacting

attitude, is by no means confined to the elderly members of the assembly. They are one and all devotees, pilgrims, disciples.

Outside the theatre, also, there is a real comradeship amongst them. There is even a well-organized Gilbert and Sullivan Society, which holds regular meetings and publishes a most interesting quarterly journal. This is not a society such as the Browning Society or the Wagner Society, existing to spread a new gospel amongst heathens (societies which die a natural death when their aims are achieved or when there is no more missionary enthusiasm, or money, left), but it is a Fellowship such as that which exists amongst the admirers of Charles Dickens.

No mere ephemeral manifestations call forth collective appreciation of this kind. Such societies can only spring into existence when the art which inspires them has survived the buffetings of cavillers and carpers and passed into the realms of classical security. In these realms, crowned with popular homage, Sullivan's comic operas now live, move and have their being.

This does not mean that criticism is silenced, nor is it desirable that it should be. But it does mean that, where Sullivan is concerned, the cultured musicians who have belittled his gifts and scoffed at his achievements as insignificant, have been proved to be hopelessly astray in their judgments. There are always some to whom the approval of multitudes is especially provocative, as we have seen already, and even fifty years of unbroken public acceptance will not quell the contradictory ardour

of the superior person who sneers, as a matter of principle, at what the crowd enjoys.

Those of us who live all our lives in an atmosphere of music are very apt to become superior persons; we are in constant danger of losing touch with that vast congregation to whom music is just an occasional stimulus and refreshment. It is therefore decidedly wholesome to come down from our perches on occasion and mingle with the crowd in order that we may catch some of their enthusiasm and learn something from those we are everlastingly trying to teach. Emerson once said, "the greatest genius is the most indebted man." If this is true (and it probably is to a certain extent) not the least of the forces to which such a man is indebted is the pulse of the great public he is seeking to guide, to serve, or to inspire.

Sullivan felt that pulse continuously, but he was no mere time-server. Thoroughly in tune with the age in which he lived, he nevertheless did much to provide for the future happiness of his own countrymen and to dispel the attitude of indifference with which English music was too often regarded abroad. His posthumous reward is the appreciation of countless thousands whose eager appetite for the works he has bequeathed to them seems to grow by what it feeds on, whose intimate knowledge of their contents furnishes a sure proof of their stimulating quality, and whose constancy remains unshaken throughout those flickering changes of fashion which have their day and cease to be.

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